Mehen, Mysteries, and Resurrection from the Coiled Serpent

The Mysteries of Mehen

In Egyptian literature, the "mysteries of Mehen" are referred to only once by name, i.e., in the Coffin Texts, and there with only very little identifying context. However, this reference is important because it is the first visible indication of a relationship between the god Mehen and recondite knowledge in Egyptian theological thought.

The primary function of the god Mehen in religious belief is depicted in the New Kingdom netherworld literature. According to the Book of Amduat, the Book of Gates, and the Book of Night, Mehen ostensibly is an immense coiled serpent who stands on the night-bark of Ra, and he guides the passage of the sun-god in his netherworld journey. Primarily, though, he encompasses Ra in his many coils, and protects him from all outside evil.1

Because of the esoteric nature of these mortuary texts and the fact that the representations of these books had a self-acknowledged mysterious character, we understand that Mehen's specific role, as exemplified within them, shared this character and was also kept as a secret. Few Egyptologists would disagree that knowledge of these texts and their representations was imparted to the Egyptian cognoscenti through some elaborate and dramatic rite of initiation, although many would differ about the exact nature of any initiation ritual and the extent to which it affected the personal identification of the initiate.

It is in these contexts that we see Mehen fully and obviously associated with mysterious behavior and secret knowledge, albeit only as a small element in a larger mystery. However, the fact that more formalized mysteries specifically centering around this peculiar deity did exist is indicated in Coffin Text Spells 493 and 495,2 where the deceased says:

\[iw \text{ bj.t } n \text{ dt.f } iw \text{ swy.i } n \text{ s ink pw mk n hbn.tw m-hi } stlw \text{ Mhn}\]

My soul belongs to its body; my shadow belongs to its condition.

I am the guard of the criminals after (the manner of) the mysteries of Mehen.3

The stSw mhn, "mysteries of Mehen," are identified with very little context or explanation; yet by their mention here, they appear to be a formalized set of rituals and beliefs related to the serpent-deity. This conclusion is based upon the general nature of stSw, "mysteries," not as dogma or creed but rather, similarly to Bleeker,

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1 E. Hornung, Amduat 2 (ÄA 7), 130-31.  
2 A. de Buck, CT 6, 77d, i.  
3 CT Spell 495. Similarly, P. Barguet, Les textes des sarcophages égyptiens du Moyen Empire (Littératures Anciennes du Proche Orient; Paris, 1986), 243-44. However, cf. R. O. Faulkner, Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts (hereinafter ECT) 2 (Warminster, 1977), 135: "My soul belongs to my body, my shade is at my side. I am the guard of the prisoners after the secret affairs of the Coiled One;" and CT Spell 493, ibid., 134, "[My] soul, my body and my shade are at its side, for I am indeed the guard of the prisoners after the secret matters of the Coiled One."
as a system of secret and dramatic rituals to reveal hidden aspects of the gods. In general though, as Ritner has suggested in the context of this spell, Mehen does not protect the sun god only by surrounding and enclosing him in his coils in order to shield him from outside evil, but also by encircling and containing the enemies of Ra—to hold them prisoner in his coils—and thus encumbering their inimicalities. Therefore, the passages in CT Spells 493 and 495 would mean that in assuming a role of guardian over criminals, i.e., the enemies of Ra, the deceased has taken on a function of the god Mehen, as revealed in the dramatic presentation of his mysteries.

Other secret knowledge related to Mehen, which may be part of the more formalized mysteries, is found in the series of Coffin Text Spells 758-760. Presently, the only known copy of these is inscribed on the headboard of the outer coffin of the imy-r msc Spi (Sepi III) from his Middle Kingdom tomb at el-Bersha, now located in the Cairo Museum, CG no. 28083. However, since a portion of Spells 758-759 did descend into the New Kingdom Book of the Dead, Chapter 181, then we would assume that these spells enjoyed a somewhat wider distribution than that which their one extant example would otherwise suggest.

These spells depict a realm of the afterlife in which the bark of Mehen encircles nine concentric roads, four of which are specifically roads of fire, which it circumnavigates for millions of years. In the vignette of the spell, the four roads of fire are depicted in red paint, and they alternate with five black roads (fig. 1). According to the texts, upon these roads of Mehen are “gates that turn away” (stbw stnmw).

The sun god, Ra, sits at the center of these roads on his throne of “millions of years,” and he guards the gates of the roads. On his head he is depicted wearing a crown reminiscent of an atf, although its constituent parts are formed by the heads and bodies of serpents. The brim of the crown is formed by a serpent with a head at both ends of its body, probably to be understood as Mehen. According to the spells, just as the fiery roads protect the adjacent sides of Mehen’s bark, so the starboard side of the bark also protects the roadways. The deceased is identified as Wrd prw m ir.t, “the Weary one who came forth from the eye,” and he is also described as one who has created the protective fire around Mehen. The text of CT Spell 758 is inscribed within a wide oval that entirely encircles the roads, which Zandee has conjectured is specifically a representation of Mehen himself, although certainly there are no other features which would support such an identification. It is clear though that the object of the deceased here is to approach Ra at the center and not to be kept off by the dangers of the roads.

Spell 759 reveals the name of these fiery roads, and they are specifically the wꜣw.t mḥn, the “Roads of Mehen”:

iw.i ṛḥ.kwi ḫstp.w īmmyw sbn.t is
iw ṛḥ.n.t wꜣw.t [Mḥn]

I am acquainted with his enemies which are in the gates.

I know the Roads of [Mehen].

6 de Buck, CT 6, 386-90; P. Lacau, CG 28001-28086, 170-99, pls. 21-25; vide Barguet, Les textes des sarcophages, 594-96; Faulkner, ECT 2, 290-93.
7 CF 28083, Lacau, op. cit.; cf. PM 4, 183-84.
8 BD 131, Tb (Allen), 107.
9 The vignette is rendered only with the five black roads in de Buck, CT 6, 386, while J. Zandee, Death as an Enemy (Leiden, 1960), 16, recognized only the four fiery roads in the scene.
11 So also Zandee, Death as an Enemy, 164, n. 10, mistakenly called “un osiris” by Lacau, CG 28001-28086, 175, while H. Ranke, Das altägyptische Schlangenspiel, SHAW 4, 10, inaccurately identified him as an anthropomorphic form of Mehen himself.
12 Cf. Ranke, op. cit., 16-18, for his description of these spells.
13 So BD 172, see below for discussion.
14 Death as an Enemy, 164-65.
15 de Buck, CT 6, 385-39.
16 According to de Buck, CT 6, 389, no. 1*, “the traces suit ... 44,” so also Barguet, Les textes des sarcophages, 595.
Similarly, in the very first line of Spell 759, the deceased must identify the specific serpent-deity involved:

\[
\textit{ir wnt Mhn pwy pw n R}^c
\]

Now as for this Mehen, he is (that) of Ra.\textsuperscript{17}

In order to enter the roads and presumably approach Ra, the deceased must “know” the roads and their name, so Spell 760 says:

\[
\textit{ir r}^h \textit{rn n w}^w.t.f \textit{f} \textit{iptn swe psw} \textit{\'k r Mhn}
\]
\[
\textit{ir r}^h \textit{pr n sk.n.f dt} \textit{\'nh.f m} \textit{\'nh.t R}^c
\]

As for the one who knows the name of those his roads, it is he who will enter Mehen.

As for the one who knows this spell, he does not perish forever; he will live on that which Ra lives.\textsuperscript{18}

Therefore, this series of spells discloses information related to Mehen that, otherwise, is not of general knowledge in the hereafter. The three passages indicate specifically the revelatory nature of Spells 758–760. The mysterious knowledge which they impart facilitates the deceased’s ability to transit this realm of Mehen, so we read in Spell 759:

\[
\textit{irw n.i w}^w.t \textit{wnw n.i sbhw.t imyw-Mhn}
\]
\[
\textit{tw.i} \textit{r}^h.kwi \textit{\'nw n R}^c \textit{hn}^w \textit{imyw.t.f}
\]

\textsuperscript{17} de Buck, CT 6, 387n, similarly Barguet, op. cit., 594.

\textsuperscript{18} de Buck, CT 6, 390k-n.
Make way for me, open the gates for me, (oh)
you (pl.) who are in Mehen,
for I know the circuit of Ra and those which
are in him (i.e., the gates).19

The $snw ~ n ~ R^5$, "circuit of Ra," refers to the
entire courseway of roads with Ra as its focus. It
consists of the enthroned Ra, the "Roads of
Mehen" and their gateways, as well as the gods
located in them. The spells indicate that Mehen
not only sails the fiery roads, but that he is the
roadway itself, spiralling inward toward Ra at
the center.

The Coiled-Serpent Game

Remarkably, the description and layout of the
"Circuit of Ra" with its "Roads of Mehen" are
nearly identical in form to the earlier Old King-
dom board game, likewise named $mhn$, i.e., the
game of the coiled serpent (fig. 2). Typically, the
squares of this game are laid atop the slotted
spine of a coiled $mhn$-snake.

Examples of this gameboard and its accoutre-
ments have been found throughout Egypt dating
from the Predynastic Period through the Old
Kingdom. Its play has been depicted on the
walls of Old Kingdom mastabas, along with
other games and recreation, as part of festive
rites of Hathor which were celebrated in honor
of the deceased tomb owner.20 In 1920, Hermann
Ranke made his seminal study of the $mhn$-
game,21 and since that work, the game has
continued to be studied by others, although only
as it has related to other research.22 Some thirteen
or more examples of the $mhn$-board are cur-
tently extant. According to a two-dimensional
representation in the tomb of Hesyre at Saqqara,
the appurtenances of the game consisted of
6 sets of colored marbles, 6 marbles per set, and

![Fig. 3. Oriental Institute Museum, no. 16950, mhn-
gameboard (Courtesy of the Oriental Institute Mu-
seum of the University of Chicago).](image)

6 draughtsmen in the forms of couchant felines
(3 lions and 3 lionesses).23

OIM Gameboard no. 16950

An excellent example of a $mhn$-gameboard,
previously unpublished, is currently located in
the Oriental Institute Museum, Chicago, no.
16950 (fig. 3).24 According to museum records, it
was purchased by Harold Nelson in Luxor in
1932. On the basis of its similarity to other $mhn$
boards of the Old Kingdom and its fine style of
execution, a dating to the Old Kingdom like-
wise seems appropriate for it.

OIM gameboard no. 16950 is typical of $mhn$
boards. It is circular in shape, carved from a
single piece of alabaster, 38 cm. in diameter, 4.5
cm. thick. The serpent is coiled in a counter-

19 Ibid., 389a-b.
20 These rites were specifically concerned with the death
and rejuvenation of the tomb owner. Cf. D. Nord, "The
Term $hnr$: 'Harem' or 'Musical Performers?'" in FS Dows
Dunham, 141f.
21 Ranke, Schlagenspiel.
22 For a recapitulation of the arguments surrounding the
$mhn$-game, see LA 5, 653-55, s.v. "Schlangenspiel";
A. Hoerth, "Gameboards of the Ancient Near East," (M.A.
23 J. E. Quibell, Excavations at Saqqara 1911-1912, pls.
11, 16.
24 I would like to thank the Director, Oriental Institute,
University of Chicago, for permission to examine and pub-
lish this gameboard.
clockwise direction, with its tail on the outside and head at the center of the spiral. Apparently, the direction of rotation was not significant, since nearly equal numbers of surviving boards show the serpent coiling in both clockwise and counter-clockwise directions. The board contains 127 squares arranged into four spirals. Here also the number of squares on the board was not standardized; as in the corpus of mhn-boards, this number ranges from as little as twenty-nine to as many as nearly 400 squares on a single board. Similar to a limited number of mhn-boards, OIM 16950 depicts a second head, that of a duck or goose, emanating from the tail of the serpent on the outside of the board. A heavy residue of brown pigment in the pores of the stone and between the game-squares indicates that at one time, it was thickly plied with brown paint, probably to emulate the natural coloration of the serpent which the board represented.

Based upon what we know of this game in the work of Ranke and others, the feline gamepieces moved in a spiral along the squares, apparently, from the tail on the outside to the head of the serpent at the center, according to rules which are not precisely understood today. What is clear, though, is that on gameboard OIM 16950, the paint is still thickly applied to the cross-slots between the squares, while in the longer spiralling grooves, it is worn thinly and smoothly, suggesting that some small object regularly rolled or passed through the spiral to achieve this wear. This conclusion would support the assertions of Klebs and others, against Quibell, that the marbles were actually utilized on the board and in the spiral, along with the feline draughtsmen.

According to the appearance of the mhn-game in the archaeological and artistic records, it is clear that it was in popular use from the Predynastic Period through the Old Kingdom, along with the board games of mn and zn.t. It is depicted very early with these two games as part of the mortuary accoutrements of Hesyre in his mastaba of the Third Dynasty and in an offering list of Rahotep in his Fourth Dynasty mastaba at Medum. Thereafter, based upon a sudden and complete dearth of evidence for the mhn-game after the fall of the Old Kingdom, both in the archaeological and artistic records, we conclude that it fell into rapid disuse, probably a victim of the social disorders and disruptions of the First Intermediate Period. There is no evidence to suggest that after that time, the game was played again in Egypt. However in the Twenty-sixth Dynasty, after a hiatus of nearly two millennia, the Egyptians did resume depicting the play of that game on the walls of their tombs. This development was part of the so-called neo-Memphite revival, when Old Kingdom artistic motives were applied to later art forms. Still, there is no evidence in the archaeological record to indicate that the game was remanufactured and played at that time. After this brief and final reappearance in the artistic record, the game of mhn passed entirely from Egyptian custom.

A Religious Context for the Mhn-game

As a parallel to the Old Kingdom game of mhn, the wEw.t Mhn, “Roads of Mehen,” in the Coffin Texts were formed by concentric circles; and just as the draughtsmen spiralled around the gameboard toward the center, so the deceased, according to CT Spells 758-760, likewise traveled in a spiralling direction in order to approach Ra enthroned at the center of the roads. Just as the track of the mhn-gameboard was segmented with individual squares, so the “Roads of Mehen” were also broken up incrementally by gateways through which the deceased had to pass and which otherwise had the.

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26 Similarly, ibid., 108.
27 So also Ranke, Schlangenspiel, 7 and n. 5, although he was unable to identify the species of bird.
28 Q.v. Quibell, Excavations at Saqqara 1911-1912, 20; Ranke, Schlangenspiel, 4-14, 25, passim; L. Klebs, Reliefs 1, 113; H. Junker, Giza 4, 36-38; P. Monet, CdE 30 (1955): 189-97.
29 Klebs, Reliefs 1, 113; Ranke, Schlangenspiel, 5, 11f, 29; Junker, Giza 4, 37.
30 Supra, n. 23 and Petrie, Medum, pl. 13, respectively.
31 E.g., in the tombs of Ibi (Theban Tomb 36) and Ankhfenemkhet, q.v., respectively, PM 1/12, p. 65 (9); J. Capart, Journal of the Walters Art Gallery 1 (1938): figs. 1-3 and D. K. Hill, Journal of the Walters Art Gallery 20 (1957): 55-61, 97f.
power to turn him away. There is no doubt that the coiled \textit{mhn}-serpent, which gave its name to that Old Kingdom gameboard, was identical to the deity properly named Mehen—this same deity who otherwise personified the circular roadway in the Coffin Texts and who similarly lent his name to those roads.\footnote{Ranke, \textit{Schlangenspiel}, 16-18.} It is apparent then that either the \textit{mhn}-gameboard was the \textit{basis} on which the "Roads of Mehen" were conceived in the afterlife or that both the gameboard and the "Roads of Mehen" originated in the same well-spring of Egyptian religious thought.

A parallel for the assimilation of the \textit{mhn}-game and afterlife roadway occurs even earlier than that indicated in the Coffin Texts, i.e., during the Old Kingdom—although in a slightly different context, for certainly in Pyramid Text Utt. 392, §541, the deceased king comes forth from a \textit{mhn}-gameboard during his ascension into heaven:

\begin{verbatim}
\textit{qdd mdw N. pw nw pr m mhn}
pr.n N. m hh.f inny
zh.n N. ptwy fi.y n. twny
\end{verbatim}

Recitation: It is this N. who has come forth from the \textit{mhn}-board.
When he came around, N. came forth from its fiery breath.
Just as N. has traveled (to) the two skies, so N. has returned (to) the two lands.\footnote{Sethe, \textit{Pyr.}, 1, §51a-c; cf. Ranke, \textit{Schlangenspiel}, 8 Mon. \textit{Cde} 30 (1955), 191, 193.}

This passage describes the circular direction of travel on the board, as well as exiting on the breath of the snake. Kurt Sethe understood the text in a similar manner.\footnote{Sethe, \textit{Pyr.}, \textit{Übersetzung} 3, 18: "NN. ist das, was aus dem Schlangentopf-Brettspiel hervorgegangen ist." However, cf. Junker, \textit{Giza} 4, 37, "T(eti) ist der Jager (\textit{nw}) der aus dem mhn-Spiel siegreich hervorgegangen ist"; Monet, \textit{Cde} 30 (1955): 196, "Teti, c'est le chasseur qui sort de la fosse-piege," so \textit{mhn}, "pitfall," i.e., a trap used in hunting.} Furthermore, he interpreted the \textit{mhn}-game in this and similar contexts as some kind of ordeal or legal trial for the deceased.\footnote{Sethe, \textit{Pyr.}, \textit{Übersetzung} 3, 15.} Faulkner, on the other hand, contended that \textit{mhn} in this text referred only to the proper name of the serpent-deity, not specifically to the gameboard, and that the deceased’s action was one of "escape" from the snake.\footnote{Faulkner, \textit{Pyr.}, 107, u. 2.}

However, Sethe would appear correct in this context. Mehen is both gameboard and serpent. While the king is conceived of as "coming forth" from that board, he is, at the same time, understood as being reborn in a blast of the serpent’s breath. The entire action functions less as a matter of "escape" than as a stage in the process of ascension.

The dual notion of Mehen as gameboard and snake from whose fiery breath the deceased is reborn is expressed more clearly in PT Utt. 758, inscribed in the pyramid of Queen Neith.\footnote{G. \textit{Jéquier}, \textit{Pyramides des reines Neit et Apouit}, pl. 26, 11, 697-98.} It is addressed to a serpent-deity named \textit{nb jht}, "Lord of the Horizon":

\begin{verbatim}
\textit{iwr N.t m fnd ms N.t p(w) m msd.t}
\textit{sf N.t m kjb.(t).k hms N.t m mhn.k}
\end{verbatim}
Neith is conceived in the nose. This is how Neith is born in the nostril.
Just as Neith rests in your coils, so Neith sits in (i.e., "resides in") your \textit{mhn}-board.\footnote{PT §§2288d-2289a, Faulkner, \textit{Pyr.}, \textit{Supplement}, 87; cf. Seche, \textit{Pyr.}, \textit{Übersetzung} 3, 15.}

This entire passage refers to the birth of Queen Neith into the afterlife from the breath and nostrils of the serpent. Residing within the coils of the serpent is synonymous with being upon the \textit{mhn}-gameboard, and is part of the resurrection process.

For the same reason in PT Utt. 659, the deceased king is exhorted to move his pieces around a \textit{mhn}-board in the context of his own deification:

\begin{verbatim}
\textit{ssp n.k ibhw.k ipw hgw m Mhnw}
p3wr h3.sn m ssr m nn.sn pw n ssr
\end{verbatim}
Take for yourself these your white ivory pieces (lit. "teeth")\footnote{So R. \textit{Ritner}, review of \textit{Fs} Zandee, in \textit{JNES}, in press.} from the \textit{mhn}-board.
Go around them as an arrow in this their name of ‘Arrow’.\footnote{Sethe, \textit{Pyr.}, \textit{Übersetzung} 3, 15.}
Similarly, in PT Utt. 626, also from the pyramid of Queen Neith, the deceased is described as being upon the mhn-board within the same context as her identification with the falcon-god named Wr:

\[
\text{\(\dd{\text{dd}}\) m\(\text{dw}\) pr.\(\text{n}\) \(\text{N.t}\) m Wr \(\text{hr.n.s}\) m bik}
\]

\[
\text{\(\text{hr}\) m \(\text{N.t}\) m m\(\text{hmw}\) Shesmu (}{\text{ph}}\text{u)}
\]

Recitation: 'It is as Wr that Neith has gone forth, and it is as the falcon that she has alighted.

The face of Neith is in the mhn-board of (this) Shesmu.'

The deceased’s presence upon the mhn board is associated with her divine transformation and ascension. The reading of this text differs from that of Leclant in his study of PT Utt. 626. While the relation of Shesmu to the mhn-board remains unclear, Leclant’s arguments to associate that deity with the board are not persuasive, based as they are on the outdated notion that the mhn-board originally represented not a coiled serpent, but a pitfall, i.e., a trap used to snare animals. However, Quibell and Ranke long ago demonstrated the mhn-board’s original connection to the coiled serpent, an identification that still remains firm despite any assertions to the contrary. Leclant argues that Shesmu’s dual nature as a deity of the oil and wine press, as well as a butcher of the enemies of the god, is appropriate for this passage. However, his assertion is unacceptable that the mhn-board through which the queen passes is actually Shesmu’s trap to crush her head. Such a notion, replete with danger for the deceased, is wholly inappropriate to the spell, which otherwise promotes the ascension and spiritual transformation of the dead queen.

Similarly to its appearance in the Pyramid Texts, in the Book of the Two Ways the mhn-board facilitates the transition to resurrection. So CT 1103 asks the question:

\[
\text{\(\text{inm}\) \(\text{phr.f}\) m\(\text{hn}\) \(\text{s.h.f}\) wd\(^{-}\)mdw Dhuty m mhpw}
\]

Who will travel around the mhn-board, whose rank is great, whom Thoth will judge in the early morning?

Sethe’s notion that divine judgment is exemplified in the successful transit of the gameboard is consistent with Thoth’s role here as a judge of the individual who goes around and through the board. Therefore, similar to Sethe’s conclusion, both PT Utt. 332 and CT 1103 would define the mhn-board as a place of ordeal in the life of the deceased, leading to final judgment by the god and hence, eternal life. Journeying across the mhn-board is tantamount in theory to traveling through the serpent, while exiting the board denotes rebirth from the body of the snake.

This interpretation differs from that of Ranke, who earlier had construed the mhn-game as a struggle between the deceased player and the mhn-serpent itself. He suggested that the goal of the game was to kill the serpent by dismemberment, as indicated by the slotting of the spine, and to remove its fangs, which he argued were detrimental to the deceased. However, this interpretation is vitiated by the function of the mhn-serpent/gameboard in the Pyramid Texts and by the beneficial and protective role of the god Mehen in the resurrection process, as we stated at the beginning of this study. Hence, Mehen should be construed as the mentor of the player, not his opponent.

The notion of the god’s birth from a serpent in his cycle of resurrection was not lost on the Egyptians even later in the New Kingdom. It is a concept that finds expression throughout the Book of Amduat, so e.g.; the Fifth Hour, in which Sokar is born from the back of a three-headed winged serpent during the course of the

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41 PT §266b, Jéquier, Pyramides des reines Neit et Aousit, pl 8, col 6.; (p. 96 for the correct reading of Shesmu); Faulkner, Pyr., Supplement, 80 (Shesmu uncorrected); J. Leclant, “T. P. Ppy i 1cr, Y: Le chapitre 626 des Textes des Pyramides,” in Fs Zandee, 78–79: 81–85.
42 “La face du roi est dans le piege (ou la constriction) de (ct) Shesemou,” ibid, 82.
43 Sethe, Isis 4, 37; Montet, CdE 1955: 196; Vandier, Manuel 4/1, 518–19; cf. supra note n. 34.
44 Quibell, Excavations at Saqqara 1911–1912, 19; Ranke, Schlangenspiel, 29.
45 de Buck, CT 7, 428c.
46 Ranke, Schlangenspiel, 29.
47 Based upon a misinterpretation of PT Utt. 659 and BD 172 (infra), q.v. ibid., 24–27.
sun-god’s regeneration; the Eleventh Hour, in which Atum comes forth from the back of a winged snake; and the Twelfth Hour, in which the netherworld-dwellers tow the god Ra, bark and all, through the body of a great serpent named "nh-ntrw, who is very likely to be associated with the god Mehen. According to that text, Ra enters through the tail of the snake in his form of the iwf-Rc, “Flesh of Ra,” and he exits via the mouth in the form of Khepri, the scarab beetle and nascent sun-god. Similariy, in the Book of Gates, Ninth Division, Horus emerges from the body of a two-headed serpent named Khepri, as part of the resurrection process described there.

During the New Kingdom, a closely related aspect of the mysterious nature of Mehen and his relation to game-playing is found in the Book of the Dead, Chapter 172, which enumerates the parts of the head of the deceased:

ibhw.k tpy[w] nw Mhn hbc n nbwy im

Your teeth are the heads of Mehen, wherein the two lords played.

Ranke, followed by Hornung, logically and plausibly suggested that according to this text, the two lords, i.e., Horus and Seth, should be understood specifically as playing the game of mhn. Ritner has indicated that in this passage, ibhw conveys a double meaning. While it means “teeth” in a context of the body parts of the deceased, in the parallel context of the mhn-game, it conveys the meaning “ivory pieces,” i.e., “draughtsmen.” Hence, it is consistent with the ibhw hdw, “white ivory pieces,” associated with the mhn-game of PT Utt. 659, mentioned earlier.

While Ritner interprets tpy[w], “heads,” also to mean the gaming pieces of the board, we are apt to understand it more literally. This reference to the heads of Mehen is very telling, since as we have already noted, many mhn-gameboards depict the serpent with two different heads: the serpent-head at the center of the spiral and a bird’s head projecting from the tail of the snake on the outside. The play on the gameboard then is identical to the movement through the serpent nh-ntrw, as described in Amduat, Twelfth Hour. The game-pieces, entering the board through the outer rank of squares could be conceived as being swallowed by the duck-head emanating from the tail, after which the pieces would travel through the body of the serpent and exit the board via the head.

As a parallel to BD 179, the notion that Mehen had two heads is found in other New Kingdom texts. The Book of Gates, Tenth Division, depicts six uraei seated on two bows; standing between them is an anthropomorphic deity with two heads, those of Horus and Seth. The figure is named, Mhn pt n i’rw.(t) hrw.f(y), “It is Mehen of the Uraei—His Two Faces,” and he occurs in a group of scenes that describes the regeneration of the sun god as a child. The accompanying text says:

Mhn pt n i’rw.t hns.f dwj.t
šnrw.t rmn.sn hrw.f(y) m štj.f

It is Mehen of the Uraei, He travels through the netherworld.

The bows, they lift up His Two Faces as his mystery.

Thus, the figure depicts the god Mehen, in whom the conceptualization with two heads clearly appears as a secret form (m štj.f). Another parallel for the double-headed aspect of Mehen is found in the Book of Day, wherein

1 Hornung, Amduat, vol. 1, 94, 7-8 (394); vol. 2, 100.
2 Ibid., vol. 1, 181, 2-4 (755/756), vol. 2, 175.
3 Ibid., vol. 1, 197, 7-12; vol. 2, 188-89.
4 Cf. Piankoff, Ramesses VI, 41, 314.
6 Tb (Neville) 1, pl. 198, 16-17.
7 Cf. Ranke, Schlangenspiel, 24: “deine Zähne sind die tpy[w] des Mhn, mit denen Horus und Seth gespielt haben.”
9 Ritner, review of Fs Zandee in JNES, in press.
10 Hornung, Pfotenbuch 2 (AH 8) pl. “Elfte Stunde.”
11 Idem, Pfotenbuch 1, 361, 78. Stiene.
12 Ibid., 366, 77. Stiene, Beschrift, idem, Pfotenbuch 2, 258.
13 Idem, Pfotenbuch 1, 367, Beschrift.
he is depicted as a circular two-headed uraeus—
similar to an ouroboros—coiled around the new-
born sun god, whom Isis and Nephthys lift up
and transfer to the day-bark.63 Significantly, the
two-headed Mehen is associated with the regener-
ative principle, since both the Book of Day and
the Book of Gates, Tenth Division, relate the
double-headed aspect of Mehen specifically to
the birth of Ra.

As noted earlier in regard to CT Spell 658, the
crown of Ra within the Roads of Mehen depicts
a single snake with a head at both ends of its
body. Based upon what we understand about
Mehen, this representation very probably depicts
him in his hidden aspect. Thus, it would appear
that in his secret form, Mehen has two heads,
which according to the Book of Gates are mani-
fested as Horus and Seth, and it is this mysteri-
ous aspect of him to which BD 172 refers when
it mentions "the heads of Mehen wherein the
two lords played."

As Horus and Seth are conceived as playing
within the two heads of Mehen, they are under-
stood as being inside the body of the serpent. We
cannot help but notice in BD 172 that the
imagery of the two gods playing a game inside
the body or circuit of the $mhn$-serpent conjures
up a clear image of the play of the Old Kingdom
$mhn$-game, in which the players' pieces likewise
travel within the circle of a serpentine game-
board.64 This notion is especially cogent in light
of PT Utt. 758, whereby the very act of residing
within the serpent's coil is analogous to being
upon the $mhn$-board, and in light of PT Utt.
626, in which the head of the deceased travels
through the gameboard. BD 172 would then
represent a New Kingdom allusion to the Old
Kingdom game of $mhn$, which indicates that
millennia later, the Egyptians had not entirely
forgotten the older religious associations of the
$mhn$-game, even though that game had long
fallen into disuse.

Field Museum Object no. 31009

This lingering memory of the $mhn$-game in
the New Kingdom and its religious associations
with the god Mehen are almost certainly reflected
in a rare object now in the collection of the
Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago, no.
31009 (fig. 4).65 This piece represents a large
coiled serpent which repeats the physical pattern
of the Old Kingdom $mhn$-game. However, un-
like the earlier gameboards, it is made of a dark
blue faience, which by the color and style of its
glaze appears characteristic of the New King-
dom.66 It was originally purchased in Egypt as
part of an ensemble with two other serpent-
amulets in June 1895 by Mr. Edward Ayer, who
donated it to the museum's collections. No
provenience is recorded.67

Physically, the serpent lies coiled on a circular
base which is 25 cm. in diameter and 1-2 cm.

thick. The body of the snake is fully formed. Its
spine is rounded, not flat like the true $mhn$
board, nor is it slotted and delineated with
game-squares like the latter. The tubular body
is up to 1.2 cm. in height, and the spiralling
gaps between the volutions consist of deeply
rounded grooves. Black paint is thickly applied

63 Piankoff, Ramesses VI, fig. 130, p. 389.
64 Similarly Ranke, Schlangenspiel, 24–25.
as spots over the blue glaze to denote the skin pattern of the snake. The eyes and mouth are modelled and outlined in black paint.

While the body of the serpent is molded to the base, the head is fully three-dimensional and stands erect above the surface. Significantly, the serpent coils in a counterclockwise direction, with the head on the outside and the tail inside, which is opposite to the traditional orientation of mhn-gameboards. The museum fiche describes the object as "part of game with amuletic significance." Clearly the piece is a votive object, almost certainly for the god Mehen. However, it is not a gameboard.

Despite key differences between FM 31009 and the mhn-board, e.g., the orientation of the head, contour of the body, and lack of game-squares, it seems evident that FM 31009, while manufactured in the New Kingdom, was inspired by at least a memory—however faulty—of the earlier mhn-gameboard. Therefore in keeping with the role of Mehen and the game's symbolism, this votive object and any others like it would have promoted the resurrection of the deceased and facilitated rebirth through the body of the serpent.

In conclusion we note the following: the mhn-game was understood as a means of transformation to rebirth through a process of journey. In the Pyramid Texts, this was to journey across the board and through the serpent in order to issue forth reborn in a blast from the serpent's nostrils. Later in the Coffin Texts, this notion was reinterpreted as to journey within the context of the "circuit of Ra," which probably was conceptualized from the pre-existing mhn-gameboard. By the New Kingdom, the lingering memory of the gameboard, in conjunction with notions of rebirth from the serpent, fostered the development of mhn-style amulets to facilitate the transition to resurrection. At the same time, the memory of the mhn-game was associated with the mysterious two-headed aspect of Mehen that was otherwise related to the birth of the sun god. This aspect of his was not generally promulgated but was kept m stj, "as his secret," i.e., only for those who were in the know, and it was thus, perhaps, part of the "mysteries of Mehen."

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