

HEB - SED FESTIVAL

Egyptian

Sed Festival: Usually given as the Heb-Sed Festival, this celebration honored the king and revitalized him. It was held every thirty years of the king's reign in order to ensure he was still in harmony with the will of the gods and physically fit to rule Egypt. The festival began with a grand procession held in front of priests, nobles, and the public. The king would need to run around an enclosed space (such as the temple complex at Saqqara) in order to prove he was fit and, in later eras, would fire arrows toward the four cardinal directions as a symbol of his power over the land and his ability to bring other nations under Egypt's influence.

The festival probably dates from the Predynastic Period in some form but is certainly attested to from the reign of King Den (c. 2990-2940 BCE) of the First Dynasty. The name comes from the deity Sed, an early wolf-god (sometimes depicted as more of a jackal), who was originally among the most important gods, associated with the strength of the king, justice, and balance (and so linked with the goddess and concept of *ma'at*). Sed was eventually absorbed by Wepwawet and Anubis and superseded by Osiris who, by the New Kingdom, had taken Sed's place in the festival. As with all the great festivals, the state provided the people with food and beer for the duration.

Although only supposed to be celebrated after the first 30 years of the king's reign (and every three years afterwards), the Heb-Sed was sometimes observed earlier and is often referred to as the king's jubilee. The length of a king's reign was once dated, in part, according to the observance of the Heb-Sed until it came to be understood that some kings initiated the festival earlier than the 30-year mark if they were in poor health (and needed the gods' rejuvenation) or for other reasons.