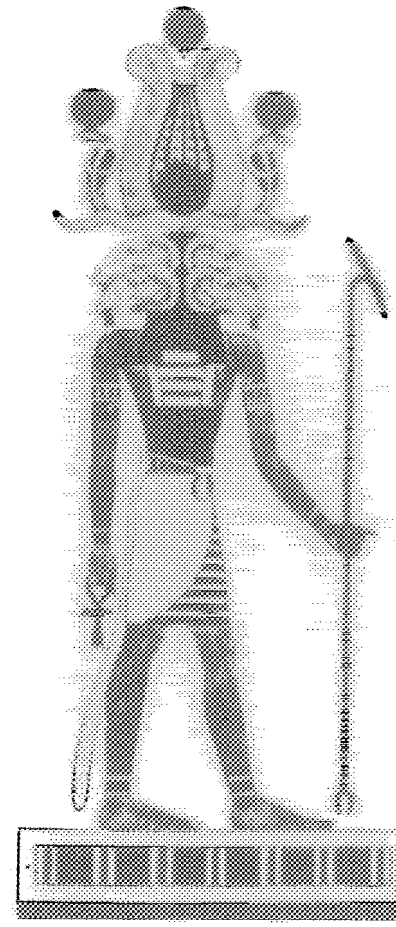

The ancient Egyptian "Lord of the four directions," Amon-Re (reprinted from Schimmel, The Mystery of Numbers*).*

Annemarie Schimmel. *The Mystery of Numbers.* x + 314 pp., illus., bibl., index. New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993. $22.

The book under review is a recast of Franz Carl Endres's *Das Mysterium der Zahl.* An introduction treats numbers and number systems, the heritage of the Pythagoreans, gnosis and cabala, Islamic mysticism, medieval and Baroque number symbolism, superstitions, and number games and magic squares. The bulk of the book is a "Little Dictionary of Numbers," which tells the uses in magic, in religious or mystical numerology, or as a topos or round number for each number of interest.

All numbers between 1 and 25 are listed, after which the list becomes gradually less dense, ending with 666, 1000, 1001, and 10,000. The Islamic, Persian, Indian, and Chinese cultures provide a large proportion of the examples, which in principle are connected to specific cultures. The list is largely descriptive; even though the preface expresses the hope that the reader will come to understand why the traffic light has three phases (p. vii), all that we learn about the topic (p. 83) is that it is listed in a publication dealing with ternary phenomena in American folklore.

Even a descriptive dictionary might have been useful for historians of science as well as students of literature, but this one has severe shortcomings. The rare references to sources for the information are unspecific. This is a characteristic of many dictionaries, and need not mean that the information itself is unreliable even though it is mostly unverifiable and its representativity unassessable. However, much of what *can* be checked here turns out to be misleading (space allows only a few examples). "Classical antiquity" turns out to encompass third millennium Mesopotamia and second millennium Egypt (p. 219). The expression $144{,}000 = 2 \cdot 60^3$ is believed to represent an enhanced 12 in the sexagesimal system instead of an enhanced 2 or an enhanced 60^3 (p. 197), and $36{,}000 = 10 \cdot 60^2$ an enhanced 36 instead of 10 (p. 243). Ideas about astronomy are vague; it seems to be presupposed that the division of the zodiac is a fact of nature (p. 192), as is the division of the circle into 360 degrees (p. 243, cf. p. 258). The polar night is believed to last nine months (p. 176), and the disappearance of the Pleiades not to depend on latitude (p. 245); the Metonic cycle is misunderstood (p. 225), and the Mayan years of 360 and 365 days are mixed up (p. 206). It is thus fitting that astronomy is understood as astrology (p. 243)—likewise, "psychology" always means Jungian speculation (*passim*), and the gauge of mathematical importance is Nicomachean (e.g., p. 213).

Repeatedly, information is taken from mistaken rumor or faulty memory; thus it is claimed that the Cyclops devours all twelve of Odysseus's companions (p. 205); that al-Khwārizmī teaches the Hindu numerals in his book on *Al-Jabr* (p. 6); and that Aristotle determined the number of categories numerologically (p. 182).

Too often wholly unspecific categories like "early times" (p. 106) and "the earliest human beings" (p. 86) occur, and too often the exposition itself verges toward numerology. Even though the illustrations are in black and white, *The Mystery of Numbers* is best characterized as a coffee-table book.

JENS HØYRUP