The Iconography and Role of Serpents in Ancient Egypt: The Serpent Demon Apophis

Alfred Eaton Walker V

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.memphis.edu/etd

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.memphis.edu/etd/24

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by University of Memphis Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of University of Memphis Digital Commons. For more information, please contact khgerry@memphis.edu.
To the University Council:

The Thesis Committee for Alfred Eaton Walker V certifies that this is the approved version of the following thesis:

THE ICONOGRAPHY AND ROLE OF SERPENTS IN ANCIENT EGYPT:

THE SERPENT DEMON APOPHIS

Lorelei H. Corcoran, Ph.D., Major Professor

Mariam Ayad, Ph.D.

Fred Albertson, Ph.D.

Accepted for the Graduate Council:

Karen D. Weddle-West, Ph.D.
Vice Provost for Graduate Programs
STATEMENT OF PERMISSION TO USE

In presenting this thesis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Master's degree at The University of Memphis, I agree that the Library shall make it available to borrowers under rules of the Library. Brief quotations from this thesis are allowable without special permission, provided that accurate acknowledgement of the source is made.

Permission for extensive quotation from or reproduction of this thesis may be granted by my major professor, or in [his/her] absence, by the Head of Interlibrary Services when, in the opinion of either, the proposed use of the material is for scholarly purposes. Any copying or use of the material in this thesis for financial gain shall not be allowed without my written permission.

Signature  Alfred Eaton Walker V

Date  April 20, 2010
THE ICONOGRAPHY AND ROLE OF SERPENTS IN ANCIENT EGYPT:
THE SERPENT DEMON APOPHIS

by

Alfred Eaton Walker V

A Thesis
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

Major: Art History

The University of Memphis
May 2010
Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank Dr. Lorelei Corcoran for all of the guidance, support, suggestions and corrections that she provided. This thesis would not have been possible without her help and I am eternally grateful for it. I would also like to thank Dr. Mariam Ayad for insight into the nature of deities discussed in this thesis and her willingness to provide ideas and resources that I had not found on my own. Dr. Fred Albertson’s corrections of my form, which was much needed, and his suggestion that I rely more on my own scholarship influenced this work and will continue to do so on in my future endeavors. I sincerely thank all three of you for the help you graciously provided.

I would not be writing this now, if it were not for my wife Bree. Her patience and the bounds of her love may have been tested during this process, mostly due to the thick layer of books and papers that has been covering the house for the past year, but she has given enduring support that has meant so much to me. This would have been a far greater obstacle to overcome without her and I thank her so much for everything she has done for me.

Finally, I would like to thank my parents for all of the love and support they have given me. They both always believed that I could accomplish this and knowing that they are proud of my work has been a constant source of encouragement. Thank you all so much.
Abstract


The serpent was a dynamic icon in ancient Egyptian art and religion. Images of serpents first appeared in the Predynastic Period (ca. 5000-2920 BC) and increased in popularity and significance throughout Egyptian history. Serpents were believed to be powerful figures and often had protective, reproductive, or healing powers.

The serpent demon Apophis, however, represented the antithesis of the protective, beneficial serpents of ancient Egyptian mythology. From the first mention of his name in the First Intermediate Period (2134-2040 BC), Apophis grew to become the greatest threat to the structured and ordered society of ancient Egypt. He embodied pure chaos because he sought to stop or destroy the solar boat on its nightly journey through the netherworld.

This thesis discusses the use of the icon of the serpent and analyzes the representations of chaos in ancient Egypt. This study presents evidence suggesting that the serpent demon, Apophis, represented the ultimate threat to the ancient Egyptians’ universe.
## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. DEPICTIONS OF SERPENTS</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 Depictions of the cobra</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 Depictions of the horned viper.</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 Depictions of an unidentifiable serpent.</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4 Ouroboros.</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5 Serpent Wands.</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.6 Cippus stela.</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.7 The African Rock Python.</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.8 Significance of the Name of Apophis and the Color Red.</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.9 The origins of Apophis</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.10 A Depiction of the Battle between Apophis and Seth</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.11 Other Depictions of Apophis.</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### 2.12 Summary

#### 3. THE MAGICAL AND DEIFIED SERPENT IN ANCIENT EGYPT

- 3.1 The Symbol of the Serpent
- 3.2 Meretseger
- 3.3 Renenutet
- 3.4 Wadjet
- 3.5 *Uraeus*
- 3.6 Use of the *Cippus Stelae*
- 3.7 The Significance of Serpent Wands
- 3.8 The Meaning of *Ouroborous*
- 3.9 The Eternal Serpent
- 3.10 Serpents of the Underworld
- 3.11 *Mehen*
- 3.12 Apophis and chaos

#### 4. THE CHAOS OF APOPHIS

- 4.1 The Hippopotamus
- 4.2 Taweret and protective hippopotami
4.3 Seth. ................................................................. 37
4.4 Characteristics of Apophis. ........................................ 40
4.5 The Magic of Apophis. ............................................. 41
4.6 The Defense of the Solar Barque. ................................. 42
4.7 A Depiction of Spell 39 of the Book of the Dead. .......... 42
4.8 Boating and Spear Hunting Scenes. ............................. 43
4.9 The Battle of Apophis and Seth. ................................. 45
4.10 The Differences between Apophis and Seth. .................... 46
4.11 Physical World Parallels to the Rise of Apophis. .......... 47
4.12 Summary. ................................................................. 49

5. CONCLUSIONS. ......................................................... 50

BIBLIOGRAPHY .......................................................... 54

FIGURES ................................................................. 60
List of Figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Serpent signs from Gardiner's sign list</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td><em>Ouroboros</em> surrounding Harpocrates.</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Serpent wand at the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td><em>Cippus</em> Stela from the Walters Art Museum</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Scene from the Papyrus of Heruben</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Seventh hour of the <em>Amduat</em> from the tomb of Thuthmosis III</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Scene from the <em>Book of Day</em> in the tomb of Ramses VI</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Scene from the <em>Book of Gates</em>, Third Hour from the tomb of Seti I</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Scene from <em>Book of Gates</em>, Sixth Hour from the tomb of Seti I</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Meretseger as a recumbent lion with human head</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Renenutet in the form of a cobra with horns and a sun disk</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Wadjet and Nekhbet as part of the titulary of King Djoser</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Uraeus with Nekhbet on the gold mask of Tutankhamun</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td><em>Mehen</em> snake from the Tomb of Seti I</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Naqada I bowl with Hippopotami</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Speared Hippos from the Mastaba of Ti</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 17: Line drawing of speared and bound hippos. .......................... 70

Figure 18: Relief of Mother hippo protecting her calf. .......................... 71

Figure 19: Gold Hippo Amulet. .................................................. 71

Figure 20: Standard depictions of the Seth animal. ............................... 72

Figure 21: The Seth animal and mythological animals from Beni Hasan ...... 72

Figure 22: Pottery vessel with boating scene from El-Amra. ................. 73

Figure 23: Hippo hunt scene from Mastaba of Ti at Saqqara. ............... 73

Figure 24: Tutankhamun spear hunting. ........................................ 74

Figure 25: Serpopards on the Narmer Palette. .................................. 75
Chapter One: Introduction

The serpent was a dominant theme in the culture of the ancient Egyptians. In the physical world, snakes were feared and respected. The ancient Egyptians were aware of the danger that snakes presented to their day-to-day life. They could harm, paralyze or kill and they demanded the respect of the ancient Egyptians. The Egyptian cobra, horned viper, and black-necked spitting cobra were all a very real danger to the ancient Egyptians. Venom from any of these three snakes could lead to paralysis or death.¹ The ancient Egyptians recorded numerous remedies for snake bites. The Brooklyn Papyrus on Snake Bites² describes 38 different types of snakes and their bites. A remedy for a bite could combine both physical and magical or religious practices.³ A bite victim might be prescribed to chew on a mixture of beer and onion or a priest could symbolically cast the poison on the ground and apply a “knife treatment” to the wound.⁴

The power of the snake was acknowledged in Egyptian religion. Their great power was projected onto the serpent deities and demons of ancient Egypt, the most significant and powerful of which was Apophis. Numerous snake demons and deities of all sizes populated the underworld and they could prove to be just as harmful as their natural world counterparts. The Book of the Dead

---


² BM 47.218.28 and 47.218.85.


provided several spells to prevent being bitten or even eaten by snakes in the afterlife: Spell 33 is titled “For Driving off a Snake”, Spell 34 is “For Not Being Bitten by a Snake in the Realm of the Dead”, and spell 35 is “For Not Being Eaten by a Snake in the Realm of the Dead.”

The demon Apophis was the most powerful of all of the serpents that could be confronted in the afterlife. Apophis not only represented a threat to the deceased but to the gods, Egypt, and the order of the cosmos. This thesis will focus on the significance of the icon of the serpent to the ancient Egyptians and how the serpent demon Apophis gained his role as the greatest opponent to the maintenance of universal order.

Chapter Two discusses the physical representations of the snake in ancient Egypt. Examples of serpents in text, relief and sculpture will be discussed in order to gain an understanding of the types of snakes the ancient Egyptians recognized and depicted in art.

Apophis is the ultimate example of the fear and power the ancient Egyptians associated with snakes. However, snakes were not only feared by the ancient Egyptians. They were also depicted as powerful, protective or beneficial deities. The uraeus, the cobra with a splayed hood, projects off of a king’s crown, protecting him from all forces that seek to do him harm. Several other beneficial serpent goddesses including Wadjet, Renenutet, and Meretseger were major deities in the ancient Egyptian religion. Chapter Three will discuss these

---

examples to interpret the positive characteristics the ancient Egyptians projected onto the icon of the serpent.

Chapter Four will examine the role that chaos played in the collective mindset of the ancient Egyptians and the three ways chaos was depicted: as an animal, such as the hippopotamus, as the god Seth, and, ultimately, as the great demon, Apophis. In almost every depiction of Apophis, he is clearly shown being defeated by Re, an agent of Re, such as Isis or Heka, or some other benevolent force. Even Seth, one of the deities of chaos often grouped with Apophis, confronts and repels the snake demon in several different texts. The threat that Apophis poses to the ancient Egyptians and their understanding of the cosmos will be discussed.
Chapter Two: Depictions of Serpents

Snakes appear in several different forms in ancient Egyptian hieroglyphic writing and art. This chapter will begin with a discussion on the general use of snakes in the ancient Egyptians’ writing and art and will then focus on the emergence of Apophis in text and relief.

Depictions of the Cobra

One of the most common snakes found in text is the cobra. The Egyptian Cobra (Naja haje haje)\(^1\) is represented in text in nine different glyphs identified in Gardiner’s sign list\(^2\) as I 10 through I 13, G 6, M 14, T 5, T 6, and V 21 (see Fig. 1). These glyphs can be separated into two main groups, the elongated cobra and the upright cobra.

The elongated cobra, sign I 10, is commonly used as the phonetic “d”, or “dj”. This cobra is depicted from a side view. Its head is facing forward with a long horizontal body that trails toward the ground line. Signs M 14, T 5, and V 21, all use a single elongated cobra in combination with other signs. Signs I 11 and T 6 depict two elongated cobras, one on top of the other.

The upright cobra, I 12, is depicted erect, facing forward, with a splayed hood. It is used as a determinative for words associated with serpents such as the word for “uraeus.” It is also used as the determinative for the names of

---

\(^1\) Houlihan, *The Animal World*, 168.

goddesses such as Nesret. Sign I 13 is an upright cobra on a basket. This sign is used to refer to goddesses as well as for the royal titulary.

The cobra in sculpture is usually depicted in the upright form. This cobra is associated with the uraeus and several goddesses such as Wadjet, Renenutet, and Meretseger. These deities will be discussed in depth in Chapter Two. Characteristics of the cobra in sculpture are: the erect head, large, open eyes, a splayed hood, and either a straightened or coiled body.

**Depictions of the Horned Viper**

The horned viper (*Naja Cerastes*), sign I 9, as a low profile, horizontal sign. Two small horns are apparent on its head, despite the profile view. This is in accordance with the traditional practice of the ancient Egyptians to take the most characteristic and easily recognized aspects of an object and rearrange them in full view on a two-dimensional image. Sign I 9, the horned viper alone, is used for the phonetic “f”. As opposed to the cobra, there are no deities associated with the horned viper. It was used exclusively in textual contexts for its phonetic value.

**Depictions of an Unidentifiable Serpent**

Signs I 14 and I 15 depict a snake that is not easily identified. Both show a snake with a raised head and tall, wavy coils. I 14 has a head very similar to the elongated cobra, I 10. I 15 has a head resembling that of an erect cobra, T

---

3 Heinrich Schafer, *Principles of Egyptian Art* (Griffith Institute, 1987), 36.


12. Both these signs were used interchangeably despite this slight difference. Similarly to the erect cobra, this serpent was used only as a determinative for words such as $hf^3w$, serpent, and $dl^3ft$, snake. Most relevant to this study is that these signs, I 14 ꝱ and I 15 ꝱ, are the determinatives for ḫḥp or ḫḥp, “Apophis.” A species identification for sign I 14 has not yet been made.

Snakes that are not intended to be identified with any specific species are used to depict general ideas or characteristics the ancient Egyptians held about snakes. Several general or unidentifiable snake motifs are used throughout ancient Egyptian art.

**Ouroboros**

The motif of the “tail-in-mouth” or *Ouroboros* became popular after the Amarna Period (1353-1333 BC) and continued to be used in late Gnostic writings and represents the nonexistent chaos that continually encircles the world on all sides. This symbol would depict a snake forming a circle with its tail in its mouth (see Fig. 2). The snake’s body would be stretched into a smooth circle with its head meeting the tail at the top of the circle. A deity or other image could be inside the circle created by the snake. The body, when colored or decorated, would have a two-toned appearance with dark markings providing texture to the

---


serpent. This is called $s\tilde{b}$, “a texture term meaning variegated or multicolored, used for animals’ skins, birds’ plumage, and snakes’ skins, but apparently not for anything else.”

This style of texturing is frequently used in representations of Apophis.

**Serpent Wands**

Snakes also appear in two motifs in sculpture: serpent wands and cippus statues. In our present discussion, the form of these objects is of more interest than their function, which will be discussed in Chapter Three. The $w\tilde{s}$ or $\tilde{d}m$ scepter, the formal staff of divine authority, could take on a serpentine form and the bottom of the staff was forked so that snakes could be pinned down and killed. Eight wands in the form of serpents have been identified in museum collections, made of either wood or bronze. One such bronze wand from the Middle Kingdom, E.63.1896, is currently in the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, UK (see Fig. 3). Its form is an erect cobra with splayed hood and a narrow, coiled body. The wand is 28 cm long and would have been held by the coils, just behind the hood. The ancient Egyptians used this figure of an erect cobra with splayed hood to represent figures of strong magical power, either as an instrument used to harness that power or a deity through which that power flowed. The function of these figures will be discussed in Chapter Three.

---


11 Ibid., 206.
**Cippus Stela**

_Cippus stelea_ became popular in the Ptolemaic Period and were stele designed to cure an ailment through magical means.\(^\text{12}\) These stele depicted the god Horus in the form of a boy standing on crocodiles, scorpions and other dangerous animals in his hands (see Fig. 4). Usually several snakes were depicted in the hands of Horus. These snakes would often resemble the I 10 cobra, but the specific type of snake is not evident. They have a slender head and body, lacking any identifiable characteristics such as a splayed hood. These snakes represent the physical danger serpents presented to the ancient Egyptians.

**African Rock Python**

Of all the snakes the ancient Egyptians would have encountered, the gigantic African Rock Python, _Python sebae_, would seem to be a very fitting candidate for the inspiration of this sign I 14 and its association with Apophis.\(^\text{13}\) African Rock Pythons can grow up to lengths of 32 feet, are very good swimmers, and are “dark brown with light brown areas on the back with a wavy stripe outlined in yellow-gold along each side.”\(^\text{14}\) These are all characteristics of Apophis. These snakes are no longer found as far north as Egypt in Africa and likely disappeared from Egypt by the end of the Early Dynastic Period.\(^\text{15}\)

\(^\text{12}\) Houlihan, _The Animal World_, 176 and 185.

\(^\text{13}\) Ibid., 171.

\(^\text{14}\) http://jaxzoo.org/animals/biofacts/AfricanRockPython.asp

\(^\text{15}\) Houlihan, _The Animal World_, 173.
Serpents on decorative objects from the Naqada III Period produced in Upper Egypt and Nubia have been identified as the African Rock Python, indicating that the snake was known to people living in this region in the Predynastic Period.\textsuperscript{16}

A definite species identification is not of paramount importance in the study of sign I 14 and Apophis. However, an identification as the African Rock Python would fit the idea the ancient Egyptians had about Apophis. I 14 suggests a larger snake than the previous discussed serpent-form signs. The bodies of I 14 and I 15 are depicted with several large humps or coils, giving the snake the appearance of a massive body. As will be documented in this study, Apophis is very frequently depicted or associated with water and his traditional coloring or markings are consistent with the African Rock Python.

**Significance of the Name of Apophis and the Color Red**

A possible interpretation of the name $\text{dj}pp$ is to take it as a composite word.\textsuperscript{17} $\text{dj}$ is the word for “great”.\textsuperscript{18} $pp$ may be interpreted as an “onomatopoeic word imitating the inarticulate or even nonverbal sound of this mythological water snake. The snake merely repeats the sound $p$ as a kind of gibbering.”\textsuperscript{19} The idea taken from this understanding of $\text{dj}pp$ would be that Apophis is the Great Babbler or Gibberish-Speaker. A babbler or gibberish speaker would represent

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 171.

\textsuperscript{17} Morenz, “Apophis,” 203.


\textsuperscript{19} Morenz, “Apophis,” 203.
the antithesis of the ordered system and structured language of the ancient Egyptian world.

Red wax or clay figures of Apophis were used in rituals associated with spells from the Apophis Book. *The Apophis Book* is the name given for a collection of texts from the New Kingdom dealing specifically with Apophis. These texts can be found in the Bremner-Rhind Papyrus, BM 10188, and were likely from Thebes.\(^{20}\) Red, \textit{dšr}, is the color customary for objects of chaos in ancient Egypt. Apophis, the chaos deity Seth, and the desert are all often associated with the color red. These wax or clay figures would be beaten, bound, trampled, spit on, stabbed, burned, or boiled in urine in order for the participants to ritually defeat Apophis.\(^ {21}\)

**The Origins of Apophis**

Apophis’ name is not mentioned in the Pyramid Texts, but does appear in the Coffin Texts of the Middle Kingdom (2040-1640 BC). The first appearance of the name of Apophis may be from the tomb of the nomarch Ankhtifi at Mo’alla from the First Intermediate Period (ca. 2100 BC).\(^ {22}\)

---


This line is found in the middle of a description of a famine:

\[ tz \text{ pn n} r\text{ripp} \]

This sandbank of Apophis. 23

Although this may well be the first recorded instance of Apophis’ name, it indicates far more than that. In later periods, Apophis was believed to be able to ground the solar baque onto sandbanks by swallowing all of the water in the celestial river. A comparison of a famine to the sandbanks of Apophis would mean that Apophis and attributes or characteristics of the deity were known on some level at this early time. No other descriptions of Apophis have been identified in the tomb of Ankhtifi. Only one small reference to an obscure serpent seems unlikely. Morenz suggests that “the conception of Apophis was transferred from popular religion (the religion of the common people of ancient Egypt) into the culture of the elite during the Period of Regions [First Intermediate Period] and remained significant until the very end of Ancient Egyptian culture or even later.” 24 This is the earliest known reference to a belief in Apophis. The true origins of Apophis are beyond the scope and power of this work, but this does establish that Apophis was associated in some way with famine, chaos, sandbanks and inversely water on some level by this time.

The earliest documented genesis story for the demon is recorded on the Temple of Khnum at Esna, the latest temple in Egypt which was built during the Ptolemaic Period (304-30 BC). Apophis was “the one who was spat out,” the


24 Ibid., 205.
product of the goddess Neith’s saliva in the primeval water. Nevertheless, the lack of an origin myth in the earlier period of ancient Egypt did not prevent the Egyptians from turning Apophis into a prominent figure of the netherworld.

Apophis frequently appeared in scenes involving the netherworld. A few of these scenes will now be discussed to provide a basis for understanding those characteristics embodied by Apophis as portrayed by the ancient Egyptians.

**A Depiction of the Battle between Apophis and Seth**

A scene on papyrus, Book of the Dead Spell 39, at the Egyptian Museum, Cairo SR 1/10254, depicts Apophis attacking the solar boat, a common theme in scenes including Apophis (see Fig. 5). The solar boat is pulled by two teams of characters, four protective uraei and four jackals. The uraei are outlined in black with a small amount of cross sectioning in red applied to under the cobras’ splayed hoods. Two arms reach out from behind each cobra in order to grasp the rope and pull the solar boat on its journey. The four jackals are colored solid black, a color associated with regeneration and rebirth, and it is assumed that the rope is tied to their necks or a collar that cannot be seen.

The sun god, in this form Re-Horakhty, sits in his boat with two mummiform figures behind him, one with the head of a falcon and the other the head of an ibis. A protective Eye of Horus, or Wadjet Eye, keeps watch over and protects the solar boat. Behind the boat, Apophis is being cut up with knives by a

---


26 Houlihan, *The Animal World*, 78.
baboon-headed servant of the sun god, rendering him harmless for another night. Baboons were often associated with the solar deities and were considered to be “heralds of the dawn.” Representations of Apophis being cut up or having one or several knives affixed to his body are not unusual.

The action at the front of the boat depicts a very intriguing scene. The great snake demon, Apophis, attempts to attack and destroy the solar boat. Apophis’ coils wind back and forth under the boat and he has raised his head up in front of the boat to halt its progress. Apophis is colored blue. This coloration probably refers to the story that in order to stop the solar boat he swallows all the water the boat is traveling on in order to dry up the celestial river and ground the boat on either the river bank or as is the case here, his massive coils. On the right of the image, where Apophis’ body has several knives attached to it, he is no longer blue and appears to have no color at all. This could be because he has presumably vomited the water back into the river, which allows the solar boat to continue on its journey.

Apophis in this scene is not only being confronted by Seth in the middle of the papyrus, but he is also being hacked into pieces by a baboon-headed servant of the sun god, which can be seen on the right side of the scene. If by any chance the confrontation between Seth and Apophis left any question as to Apophis’ fate, there would be no doubt when the entire scene was observed.

27 Ibid., 96.


29 Hornung, Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt, 158.
After Seth forces Apophis back from the boat, he is cut into several pieces, ensuring that the solar boat may pass safely for another night.

**Other Depictions of Apophis**

This thoroughness of the destruction of Apophis is mirrored in other representations from New Kingdom mortuary texts. A scene from the Seventh Hour of the *Amduat*, a text detailing the movement of the solar boat throughout the netherworld, in the tomb of Tuthmosis III in the Valley of the Kings (KV 34), depicts the solar boat being confronted by Apophis (see Fig. 6).\(^{30}\) In this scene, it is not Seth but Isis who stretches out her hand and with her magic repels the powerful snake demon.\(^{31}\) In combination with Isis’ powerful magic, the two other figures have plunged several knives into the serpent. Apophis is depicted here in front of the solar boat, instead of underneath and wrapping around it and with two-toned, *s3b* textured skin.

A scene from the Book of Day, in the Tomb of Ramses VI (KV 9), depicts a slightly later scene in the progression of the sun god (see Fig. 7).\(^{32}\) The solar barque has already passed by Apophis, thanks no doubt to the small army of gods accompanying the solar deity, and he is already being cut up with a dagger and a spear. Apophis’ speckled texture, *s3b*, is easily recognized.

---


In the Third Hour of the Book of Gates, in the Tomb of Seti I (KV 17), Apophis and his menacing, massive coils can clearly be identified (see Fig. 8).\textsuperscript{33} His attempt to move forward to search out the solar god is being blocked by Atum, the great creator god of Heliopolis.\textsuperscript{34} Here, Apophis has a green and white two-toned colorization with the $\textit{s\textsuperscript{3}b}$ texture.

In a depiction of the Sixth Hour of the Book of Gates, also from the tomb of Seti I, Apophis is shown somewhat differently, in that he has several human heads protruding from his body (see Fig. 9). In the text, it states that Apophis has swallowed these heads, which would normally be a horrifying fact. However, as the solar boat approaches Apophis, a spell causes the heads to turn and devour Apophis himself, incapacitating him until the sun god is safely past the snake demon once more.\textsuperscript{35} In this scene Apophis is depicted with the $\textit{s\textsuperscript{3}b}$ texture with a yellow and green color scheme.

Several scenes from the Ptolemaic Period at the Temple of Hathor at Dendera and the Temple of Horus at Edfu depict the king spearing or slaying Apophis, instead of a god or gods dispatching Apophis.\textsuperscript{36} Two scenes from the Temple of Hathor at Dendera associate Apophis with a crocodile. In these two scenes from the East Crypts Room B, Ptolemy XIII spears a tiny crocodile in front

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 535-545.
\item \textsuperscript{34} Erik Hornung, \textit{The Valley of the Kings: Horizon of Eternity} (New York, Timken Publishers, 1990), 143.
\item \textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 112.
\item \textsuperscript{36} Porter and Moss, \textit{Topographical Bibliography} vol. I, pt. II, 511., pp. 84, 129, 136, 158, 163.
\end{itemize}
The crocodile is identified as Apophis in the relief above the scene. The identification of Apophis with a crocodile is atypical but not problematic. The Nile crocodile was known for its strength, voracious appetite, and fierceness. These were all characteristics of Apophis and is evidence for the ancient Egyptians identification of the serpent demon with powerful chaos.

**Summary**

Snakes abound in the artistic production of the ancient Egyptians: in texts, sculpture, and wall relief. Cobras, vipers, and pythons can be identified and were used to represent different ideas and deities. The African Rock Python may have been the snake that came to be associated with Apophis, “The Great Babbler,” by the Middle Kingdom. Apophis continued to appear throughout ancient Egyptian art into the Ptolemaic Period (304 BC-AD 30), usually depicted as a large python with $s3b$ texturing almost always being defeated by the agents of truth and order. There were also several serpent goddesses as well as other powerful serpents that would become major influences on ancient Egyptian culture, religion, and society. These will be discussed in the next chapter.

---

37 E. Chassinat, Le Temple de Dendera: Planches (Cairo Institut Français d’ Archéologie Orientale, 1947), Pl. CCCLXXXV, CCCLXXXII.

Chapter Three: The Magical and Deified Serpent in Ancient Egypt

In the Second Chapter the form of snakes in the art of the ancient Egyptians was discussed, including their physical characteristics and representation. In this chapter, the function of serpents in the art and mythology of ancient Egypt will be discussed.

The Symbol of the Serpent

The ancient Egyptians used symbols in art to solidify beliefs they held concerning the world around them. Ancient Egypt was a place “where the relationship between religion and ecological environment is especially accentuated.”¹ The tendency of ancient Egyptians to have ever evolving beliefs and customs can make the studies of these symbols challenging and problematic. Symbols seem almost to have a life of their own. As Wilkinson remarks, “Their meanings may change over time, and it does not always follow that the symbolic significance of a given element in one composition will be identical in another work of earlier or later date.”² The following discussion will focus on the symbol of the serpent in ancient Egypt as a complex and dynamic image.

One of the most enduring and common uses of the symbol of the snake is in the depiction of various deities within the ancient Egyptian pantheon. Male and female deities were represented as serpents and they ranged from unknown,


vague deities to popular ones, such as Meretseger who was actively worshipped in Thebes.\textsuperscript{3} Several major deities can be associated with serpents in (addition to Meretseger) including, Renenutet and Wadjet. The uraeus, the sacred cobra and protector of the king, is commonly seen throughout ancient Egyptian history. These supernatural serpents will now be discussed to investigate what common themes run through their mythology and iconography.

**Meretseger**

Meretseger, whose name means “She who loves silence”, is the goddess who watched over the Theban necropolis and was associated with the pyramidal peak that rises above it.\textsuperscript{4} She had the titles of “Mistress of the West” and “Peak of the West”, both of which are associated with the location of the mountain and necropolis on the west bank at Thebes.\textsuperscript{5} She was depicted in many forms; as a rearing cobra, sometimes with a woman’s head, as a snake-headed woman, and as a scorpion with a female head.\textsuperscript{6} Snakes and scorpions were both creatures from the desert, which is most likely why they were both used in depictions of Meretseger.


\textsuperscript{5} Harry W. Cartwright, “The Iconography of Certain Divinities as Illustrated by the Collections in Haskell Oriental Museum,” *The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures* vol. 45 no. 3, (1929), 189.

\textsuperscript{6} See Bernard Bruyère, *Mert Seger à Deir el Médineh* (Cairo: Cairo Institut Français D’Archéologie Orientale, 1930), fig.44.
She has been depicted in human form suckling the deceased in Tomb 336 of Neferronpet at Deir el-Medina and as a combination deity of Hathor-Meretseger in the form of a cow in a mountain in Tomb 177 of Amenemopet at the Temple of Ramses II and Tomb B3 of Hauf in the Khokha area. In both of the scenes with Hathor-Meretseger, the tomb owners are shown offering to the deity. “She may have been an object of a domestic cult in the nearby village of the royal tomb-builders and their families, Deir el-Medina, because snake figurines were found during excavations, many of which were covered with cooking soot, suggested she provided protection for the kitchen.”

A possibly unique depiction of the goddess is found on a stela at the University of Chicago, OIM 11107. The unusual thing about this stela is that Meretseger has taken the form of a recumbent lioness with a human head, complete with the Hathoric horns of a cow and solar disk (see Fig. 10).

Several stelae dedicated to Meretseger asking for forgiveness have been found at Deir el-Medina when she was believed to blind or sting those guilty of crimes. On a stela dedicated to Meretseger, a man named Nefer’abu confessed:

[I was] an ignorant man and foolish
Who knew neither good nor evil
I wrought transgression against the (Western) Peak,
And she chastised me.
I was in her hand by night as by day:

---


I was like the woman in travail upon the bearing-stool.\textsuperscript{10} Meresteger showed mercy to Nefer’abu. She cured him and he thankfully declares:

\begin{quote}
‘She turned again to me in mercy
She caused me to forget the sickness that has been (upon) me.’\textsuperscript{11}
\end{quote}

A short inscription by a man named Nekhtamun claims of Meretseger, “Thou causes me to see darkness by day,” meaning that she had blinded him.\textsuperscript{12} The ancient Egyptians held the belief that the serpent goddess of the Theban necropolis, Meretseger, had the power to punish those who had sinned against her and she also had the power, as can be seen by Nefer’abu’s stela, to forgive and heal those she had punished. Due to her close relationship to the inhabitants of Deir el-Medina, her popularity would have reached its zenith in the Nineteenth Dynasty (1307-1196 BC).\textsuperscript{13}

\textbf{Renenutet}

The goddess Renenutet was closely associated with nursing, fertility, agriculture, and granaries and was often depicted in the form of a hooded cobra with a sun disk, horns, and dual plumes.\textsuperscript{14} She may also be depicted, like

\begin{quote}
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 84.
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{13} Although peaking in the Nineteenth Dynasty, Deir el-Medinah was populated from the Eighteenth to Twenty-first Dynasties (1550-712 BC). Meretseger would have been worshipped at the site over this 800 year period.
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
\end{quote}
Meretseger, with several different crowns or as a woman with a snake’s head or
as a woman holding or nursing a child (see Fig. 11). Renenutet was a popular
and beneficial deity. Her cult was centered in the Fayum from the Middle
Kingdom (2040-1640 BC); however, there is evidence she was worshipped in
several other cities such as Terenuthis, Giza, Abydos, and Thebes. She was
associated with several other major deities of the ancient Egyptian pantheon
including: Sobek, Horus, Osiris, and Hathor. In the Ptolemaic Period (304 BC-
AD 30), she became assimilated with Isis and she was associated with the

Renenutet’s name directly ties her to her nursing and life giving qualities.
“\textit{Rnn}” and “\textit{Rnn.t}” are words for nursing and a wet nurse, respectively.\footnote{Adolph Erman and Hermann Grapow, \textit{Wörterbuch der ägyptischen Sprache} vol. II, (Leipzig, J.C. Hinrichische Buchhandlung, 1928), 436-437.} Her
titles and epithets are numerous and, like her name, all reflect her fertility and
life-giving characteristics. Some of her epithets are “Lady of the Fertile Land”,
“Lady of the Threshing Floor”, and “Lady of the Granaries, Beautiful Mistress of
Provisions” and “in the New Kingdom Litany of Re she appears in the underworld
as the ‘Lady of Justification’ and in this form she may be associated with the
goddess Maat.”\footnote{Hansen, “Snakes,” 225.} Her name first appears in the Old Kingdom in the Pyramid
Texts (PT 302) but she is not depicted in art until the New Kingdom (1550-1070
A priest called Mari, who lived in the Fourth Dynasty (2575-2465 BC), is
known to have been a priest of Renenutet and evidence for her cult is preserved
at the Middle Kingdom temple that Amenemhat III built in honor of the goddess.19
The Festival of Renenutet was celebrated as crops were sown and as they
began to ripen. There seems to be some overlap between the festival of
Renenutet and the feast of Min. The confusion is due to the ancient Egyptians
use of more than one calendar. The date of the Min’s feast was on the first day
of the Egyptian lunar month, which either directly followed or coincided with the
first day of the ninth month of the civil calendar, which was the date for the feast
of Renenutet.20

Wadjet

Wadjet was also associated with the cobra and her name means the
green one.21 Green was a symbol of regeneration and of life itself. “To do ‘green
things’ was a euphemism for positive, life producing behavior.”22 Wadjet acted
as a mythical midwife of the king. She was a protective titular goddess
associated with the Nile Delta, whose seat was at Buto in the northwest Delta.
Wadjet came to be used as a symbol of all of Lower Egypt and was often paired

---

18 Ibid, 297.
19 Leibovitch, 105.
22 Wilkinson, Symbol & Magic in Egyptian Art, 108.
with the vulture goddess Nekhbet as a symbol of the unity of Upper and Lower Egypt (see Fig. 12). Some of her titles are “Mistress of Awe” and “Mistress of Fear” and she was believed to spit flames at the enemies of the king.²³ She was also associated with nursing and the Eye of Re. “She was certainly closely linked to the king, both in the ‘two ladies’ or ‘two goddesses’ title of his royal protocol and as a protective deity in the form of a royal uraeus worn on the monarch’s crown or headdress.”²⁴

**Uraeus**

The uraeus is the erect cobra that appeared on the front of a crown in ancient Egypt (see Fig. 13). Uraei appeared throughout all periods of ancient Egyptian history and were believed to have potent protective powers. When appearing on a crown, a uraeus could appear alone, paired with a vulture, symbolizing Nekhbet, or a second uraeus, as was common during the 25th (Nubian) Dynasty.²⁵ One myth explaining the origins of the uraeus says that Atum sent his eye out to bring Shu and Tefnut back to him. When his eye returned, it saw that the sun had replaced it. The eye became furious and transformed itself into a cobra. Atum appeased it by placing it on his brow.²⁶

All three goddesses, Meretseger, Renenutet, and Wadjet, share attributes and responsibilities. They are all associated with cobras. Protection, fertility, 

---


nursing, reproduction, and regeneration are all common themes in the representation and mythology of these three goddesses. However, the icon of the serpent was used in other ways throughout ancient Egyptian mythology. Some of these instances will now be investigated.

**Use of the *Cippus* Stelae**

*Cippus* stelae were places where serpents regularly appeared, but these stelae were particularly popular during the Ptolemaic Period (304 BC-AD 30). The earliest *cippus* dates to the Ramesside Period (1307-1196 BC). Horus the Child, Harpocrates, was particularly associated with *cippi*. This was because the ancient Egyptians believed that Horus had survived a snake bite as a child, with the help of Thoth. Water or wine would be poured over the *cippus* and then collected in basins. “This water, when drunk, was believed to be able to cure an individual suffering from an attack by vicious creatures, just as Horus had been cured.” *Cippi* could be set up in a temple or house and small *cippi* were even produced that could be worn as an amulet.

*Cippus* stelae depict Harpocrates holding several creatures, not only serpents but other animals such as scorpions, lions, or an oryx, as can be seen in a *cippus* (22.335) from the Walters Art Museum, Baltimore (see Fig. 4).

---


Harpocrates would also be standing or trampling on crocodiles. These animals can all be interpreted as representative of chaos, or chaos animals, an idea which will be discussed in the next chapter. Several other inscriptions or spells could be inscribed on the stela emphasizing the stela’s powerful magical ability to cure the afflicted Egyptian.

The *cippus* is an example of the ancient Egyptian’s use of sympathetic magic. Sympathetic magic is the belief that a creature could be controlled or manipulated by an image(s) of the exact same creature. According to this belief, images and representations of snakes would be the best implement to control and counteract dangerous serpents and their venomous bites.

**The Significance of Serpent Wands**

The serpent wand is another example of the use of sympathetic magic in ancient Egypt. Although depictions of clutched serpents, such as the ones depicted on *cippus* stelae, are much more common, at least eight serpent wands have been identified from the archeological record. These serpent wands were made of metal or wood and would simply be in the form of a serpent (see Fig. 3). The assumed magical power of these serpent wands cannot be overstated. “The mere presence of a serpent wand in an uninformative burial led the occupant to

---


be labeled as a magician.”

Heka, magic deified, was characteristically shown holding two serpents crossed over his chest. Images of protective spirits holding serpents are characteristic of New Kingdom amuletic knives used to delineate a magic circle or defensive perimeter around the bed of a mother or child.

The Meaning of Ouroboros

A serpent symbol that appeared after the Amarna Period (1353-1333 BC) is the “tail-in-mouth” or Ouroboros (see Fig. 2). These names refer to the same symbol; ouroboros is the Greek term for the Egyptian symbol of the circular snake with its tail in its mouth. The ouroboros is the symbol of eternity and the constant renewal of time. “In the pyramid texts it is the serpent as circle which gives the king life.”

It is the regenerating nonexistence that encircles the world. The ancient Egyptians believed that snakes not only existed eternally on the boundaries of the created world, as in the case of ouroboros, but they assisted in the creation of the world and would endure after its destruction.

---

33 Ritner, “And Each Staff Transformed into a Snake,” 205.
35 Ritner, “And Each Staff Transformed into a Snake,” 213.
36 Lana Troy, Patterns of Queenship in Ancient Egyptian Myth and History, (Uppsala, Uppsala University, 1986), 44.
37 Erik Hornung, Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt, 164.
The Eternal Serpent

Papyrus Bremner-Rhind Papyrus III contains a description of how snakes assisted with the creation of the world. The creator god stated that this was “a time when the sky did not exist, the earth did not exist, solid land had not been created...I created some of them (snakes) in the Primeval Ocean as Inert Ones, at a time when I had not yet found a place to stand.”\(^{38}\) These snakes assisted with the remaining work of creation, but they were not a part of the creation of the regular world. They were a separate group of creatures. After the snakes died, the creator mummified them and placed offerings on their tomb on the same day every year, perhaps explaining the origins of a funerary cult.\(^{39}\) Like ouroboros, they existed before the created world, but they had to remain apart from it. They did not live forever, as ouroboros does, but they were mummified by the creator god who made offerings to them every year, symbolizing their regeneration.

As the world’s creation was preceded by the creation of snakes, so too will be its destruction. Atum, the great creator god of Heliopolis, speaks of the destruction of the world in Book of the Dead Spell 175, “For Not Dying Again.” In this spell, Atum says:

> I will dispatch the Elders and destroy all that I have made; the earth shall return to the Abyss, to the surging flood, as in its original state. But I will remain with Osiris, I will transform myself into something else, namely a serpent, without men knowing or the god seeing.\(^{40}\)


\(^{40}\) Faulkner, *Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead*, 201.
Atum will return creation to the abyss, the very place from which the creation serpents helped raise the primordial mound. After he has returned creation to the waters, he will turn himself into a serpent. The created world, through the eyes of the ancient Egyptians, was bracketed by powerful serpents. They helped create the world and were honored for all time. Upon the destruction of the world, Atum will assume the form of a snake and eternally live in the primordial waters. This exactly parallels the concept of the eternal snake, *ouroboros* /“tail-in-mouth,” who cannot be a part of the created world, but must exist just beyond its borders.

**Serpents of the Underworld**

The snakes that existed just beyond the limits of creation were not the only supernatural serpents in Egyptian mythology. Serpents can be found in the depictions and textual descriptions of the underworld of the ancient Egyptians. The New Kingdom Books of the Netherworld saw an explosion of serpents depicted and utilized in the mythology of the sun’s nocturnal journey from sunset to sunrise. It is in these Books of the Netherworld that the battle between Apophis and the sun god, which will be discussed in the next chapter, becomes a major theme. Apophis may be an adversary to the sun god, but there are beneficial serpents in the netherworld as well. In the Book of Caverns, snakes guard the damned in the first cavern.⁴¹ These powerful serpent guardians vigilantly watch over the enemies of Osiris to prevent them from escaping. The

---

sun god Re must properly address the serpents that guard the entrances and exits to each cavern so that they will allow him to pass, illustrating the power the ancient Egyptians believed these guardian serpents possessed.42

Mehen

Serpents did not just guard the entrances to new hours, gates, or caverns of the underworld. The mehen snake appears in numerous places, protecting the sun god and his emissaries.43 The mehen snake would appear usually around the sun god as a long, thin serpent, with many coils and a reared-back head (see Fig. 14).44 He could either appear around the sun god’s cabin, or he would act as the cabin itself, protecting the sun god from any attackers, especially Apophis.

Mehen was also associated with rebirth and resurrection. Mehen was mentioned in the Coffin Texts, specifically spells 493, 495, and 758-760. In these instances, the guardian qualities of the mehen snake are mentioned as well as his winding coils which form the roads of Mehen and lead to Ra and rebirth.45 This idea paralleled a mehen board game from the Old Kingdom (2649-2134 BC) which consisted of a coiled serpent game board, the purpose of which was to reach the center of the coils and mehen’s head. “This was to journey across the

42 Ibid., 152-153.


board and through the serpent in order to issue forth reborn in a blast from the serpent’s nostrils.”

Apophis and Chaos

The serpent played a dynamic role in the mythology of the ancient Egyptians. Major deities such as Meretseger, Renenutet, and Wadjet, the uraeus and mehen snakes, and the eternal ouroboros, embodied the powerful protective and regenerative aspects the ancient Egyptians believed snakes possessed. Apophis, however, was very different from these other snakes. The aspects of power projected onto other serpents were also given to him, but he was more powerful than any other serpent. Apophis did not take on the protective or nurturing aspects that his fellow serpents acquired. He was a destroyer, not a protector. He sought to end all life, not continue its regenerative cycle. Apophis sought to bring chaos to the ordered ancient Egyptian world. He was chaos itself. The Egyptians not only saw the benevolent forces at work in the natural world, but also the chaotic danger that forever surrounded them. In the next chapter, Apophis’ one true characteristic, chaos, will be discussed, including what the ancient Egyptians thought of chaos and Apophis’ specifically, named powers that could bring about the collapse of ancient Egypt and cause the end of the universe, as they perceived it.

\[46\text{ Ibid., 52.}\]
Chapter Four: The Chaos of Apophis

For the ancient Egyptian, chaos represented the ultimate threat to Ma’at and the structured order of their universe. The ancient Egyptians depicted their concept of chaos in many different ways. Powerful animals such as the serpent and hippopotamus, the god Seth, and the demon Apophis all were used to represent chaos. The last two supernatural beings, Seth and Apophis, are documented in mythic battles with each other, which is an intriguing example of the forces of chaos in opposition.

The Hippopotamus

The hippopotamus is an animal that would have and did command a great deal of respect from the Ancient Egyptians. In terms of sheer size, the hippo varies from 10-16 feet long, up to 5 feet to the top of the shoulder, and can weigh anywhere from 3,500 to 9,000 pounds. The only land mammal heavier than the hippo is the elephant.\(^1\) The hippopotamus is a herbivore, but it can be very territorial and will attack humans if threatened or provoked. The modern range of the hippo extends only as far north as Khartoum. However, in Ancient Egypt, hippos could be found all along the Nile River wherever the current was not too strong.\(^2\)

It would be hard for any population of people to ignore these massive creatures. The Ancient Egyptians depended on the Nile for almost every aspect

\(^1\) http://www.sandiegozoo.org/animalbytes/t-hippopotamus.html

of their life, which would have thrust them into the constant midst of the hippopotamus.

As frightening as a one-on-one experience with an irate hippopotamus might be, the animal’s voracious appetite was also one of the Ancient Egyptians’ chief concerns. The hippo would spend most of the day in the cooling waters of the Nile, but at night it would leave the river and head inland in search of food, which would often turn out to be the crops of local farmers. There are numerous mentions of the destructive powers of a hungry hippopotamus in texts and relief.¹

The hippopotamus’ earliest appearance in Ancient Egyptian art occurred in the Predynastic Period. One of the earliest and best preserved examples of hippopotami in predynastic art is a red silt bowl decorated with several white figures of hippopotami, now in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (11.312) (see Fig. 10).² This bowl is dated to Naqada I. A schist palette from this same period shows a man on a small boat harpooning a hippopotamus. This is one of the earliest examples of the hippopotamus hunting scene motifs that have been found. The man seems to have already harpooned the animal as is evident by the rope extending from the man to the hippo. In the Old and New Kingdoms, the hippopotamus hunt became a popular scene in funerary contexts.

The Ancient Egyptians’ believed that images in art, such as mortuary texts and relief, could come to life in the context of the afterlife. Dangerous animals


that were extremely powerful and frightening to the Ancient Egyptians could not be allowed to roam free to harm or even devour the deceased or cause apocalyptic damage. Therefore, they made sure that when a character of potential harm was depicted that it was shown clearly being defeated, cut up, or tied down. An example of this belief can be seen in the Mastaba of Ti at Saqqara, from the Fifth Dynasty (see Fig. 16). Two hippos, animals representative of tremendous power and chaos, have been extensively speared and the crocodile has been bitten by the hippo, not allowing it to roam freely in the waters of the afterlife. This is not to say that all hippos and crocodiles are shown completely incapacitated in relief. There are many who do roam free, but to reduce any harm they might cause, their scale has been greatly reduced.

Examples of hippopotami dating to the Middle Kingdom (2040-1640 BC) are almost exclusively sculpted pieces. The famous blue faience hippos date only to this period. These hippos were decorated with vegetation and other items associated with the Nile. Bothmer descriptively stated that, “The pattern of water plants was intended to convey an idea of the natural habitat of the beast; the hippopotamus rising from the waters of a swamp or muddy river bank, covered with the flora of the Nile.”

A hippo hunt relief from the Mortuary Temple of Pepi II depicts the king harpooning a hippo as well as another hippo tied down to sledge, although much of this relief is a reconstruction (see Fig. 17). Hippopotamus hunting scenes like

---


the one in Pepi II’s mortuary temple occur in various stages on tombs beginning in the Old Kingdom (2649-2134 BC). Hippo hunting shown in Old Kingdom relief was represented as a duty of the king and the defeat of the animal was symbolic of his victory over chaos.\(^7\) These depictions show the ability of the king to dominate or kill the chaos animal, the hippopotamus, and maintain *Ma’at*. King Den of the First Dynasty not only harpoons a hippo in a scene found on a seal, but he also wrestles with it as well, thus proving his skill as a hunter and his superhuman strength.\(^8\) However, there are also private tombs with hippopotamus hunting scenes, attributed to the third, fourth, and fifth dynasties, including from the mastaba of Idut at Saqqara and another, of an unknown individual, at Deir el Gebrawi.\(^9\)

Male hippopotami were associated with Seth, god of chaos.\(^10\) In the mythological tale, *The Contendings of Horus and Seth*, Seth challenged Horus to a race.\(^11\) The boats were supposed to have been made out of stone, but Horus made his from wood and plastered it over with gypsum. Seth did not realize this and made his own boat out of stone from the top of a mountain. Seth’s boat, of course, sinks; in anger he transforms himself into a hippopotamus and sinks

---

\(^7\) Peter Lacovara, “A New Date for an Old Hippopotamus”, *Journal of the Museum of Fine Arts* vol. 4 (1992), 17.

\(^8\) Soderbergh, *On Egyptian Representations of Hippopotamus Hunting*, 16.

\(^9\) Ibid, 13-14.

\(^10\) Herman Te Velde, “Seth”, *Lexikon der Ägyptologie*, vol.V, (Germany, Otto Harrassowitz, 1984), 908.

Horus’ ship. Horus then picks up a spear and hurls it at the Seth-hippopotamus, but the Ennead instructs Horus not to kill him. The great power of the animal of chaos, the hippopotamus, is associated with and harnessed by Seth, the fierce god of chaos. The spear-hunting motif, presumably for hippopotami, is used to convey the idea of victory over chaos, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

The story of the Hyksos king Apophis insulting the Theban, Seventeenth Dynasty king Sekenenre incorporates the motif of hippos being used to show royal power. Apophis sent a messenger to Sekenenre with the message that the Theban hippopotami in the river were so loud and unruly that they were keeping his citizens up at night in the delta. Given that it is between 300 and 350 miles between the two cities, this obviously could not have actually been the case. Apophis was claiming that Sekenenre could not fulfill his royal duty of maintaining order in his land since chaos, in the form of the hippopotami, was stronger than the Theban king’s power.

Male hippos are often painted red, the customary color of Seth and Apophis. Red was used by the Ancient Egyptians to show evil or dangerous things, such as fire and the waters of the inundation. A second, more natural link to the association with hippos and the color red is the sticky reddish “sweat” that hippos produce. This substance acts as a natural sunscreen and an

\[12\text{ Ibid., 17.}\]

antibacterial salve. This helps protect the hippo from the powerful Egyptian sun and heals any cuts, scratches, or bites from fighting or day to day life on the Nile.

Even though the great power of the hippopotamus led the ancient Egyptians to characterize it as a chaos animal of the Nile, they also interpreted its power as a benevolent, protective force. A few of these examples will now be analyzed.

**Taweret and Protective Hippopotami**

Taweret is a composite deity that is associated with the hippopotamus. Her name means either “the great one” or “the fat one.” She is a protective deity often associated with childbirth and maternity. She also protected children from evil spirits and dangerous creatures, especially crocodiles. She is usually depicted with the arms and legs of a lion, the back and tail of a crocodile, and the body and head of a hippopotamus. Her body may be interpreted as being shown in the late stages of pregnancy, showing her ties to maternity. If she is wearing a crown or headdress, it is comprised of a low modius surmounted by two plumes sometimes with horns and a disk. She will have with her the sꜢ, symbol of protection, ḕḥ, symbol of life, or a torch. Taweret does not seem to have had a formal cult, but judging by the large amount of images of the goddess that have survived, she appears to have been one of the most popular of household

---

14 http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/3749351.stm


deities.\textsuperscript{18} It seems that the Ancient Egyptians had observed the protective maternal practices of the hippo. Not only is Taweret an example of this, but a relief in Mereruka’s mastaba shows a mother hippo protecting her calf from a crocodile (see Fig. 18).

Protective gold amulets of these hippos have been intended to depict the good qualities of the mother hippopotamus. Gold and white were symbolic of goodness and purity. An example of a gold hippo amulet is in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (27.854) (see Fig. 19).

The blue faience hippos seemed to combine the natures of the red and gold/white hippos. Some of the blue hippos have indications of being tied up in rope. Others have their head turned and mouth open in the style of Old Kingdom hunting scenes. Some faience hippos were broken, to ritually kill them, and protect the tomb owner from the power of the hippo in the afterlife.\textsuperscript{19} Other examples of blue hippos seem to be calm and passive, depicted as standing or squatting.

\textbf{Seth}

The interpretation of Seth by the ancient Egyptians was an ever evolving one. There are many similarities between the representation of an animal of chaos, such as the hippopotamus, and the god Seth. Seth is one of the most complex deities of the ancient Egyptian pantheon. He has been labeled as evil, despised, and wicked. There is absolutely no denying that Seth has been

\textsuperscript{18} Wilkinson, \textit{The Complete Gods and Goddesses of Ancient Egypt}, 186.

\textsuperscript{19} Peter Lacovara, “A New Date for an Old Hippopotamus”, 24.
associated with less than honorable stories in ancient Egyptian religion. It cannot be forgotten or overlooked that he is the murderer of Osiris, the father of Horus. The ensuing battle for the throne of Osiris contained fierce battles, cross-country chases, and even Seth sexually assaulting Horus. Seth was associated with chaos, thunderstorms, deserters, foreigners, and drunks.\textsuperscript{20} He was, however, also revered for his strength and power. Iron, the hardest metal known to the Ancient Egyptians, was called the “Bones of Seth.”\textsuperscript{21}

Seth’s first representations appear as early as the Predynastic Period (5000-2920 BC). His characteristic Seth animal is clearly depicted on the mace head of King Scorpion.\textsuperscript{22} Adding to the uniqueness of Seth, the animal with which he is related appears to be a mythological creature. This would be the only instance of a major deity being associated with a mythological animal. The Seth animal can be clearly recognized by its long, straight flat ears, dog or jackal-like body, elongated downward curved snout, and erect tail (see Fig. 20). There have been many possible explanations put forth as to just what animal this was supposed to represent. The most plausible one is that this animal was meant to be a mythological creature, associated with the wilderness and chaos of the desert, which would be a perfect match for Seth.

\textsuperscript{20} Te Velde, “Seth,” 908.

\textsuperscript{21} Herman Te Velde, \textit{Seth, God of Confusion: A Study of His Role in Egyptian Mythology and Religion}, (Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1967), 7.

\textsuperscript{22} Te Velde, “Seth”, 909.
Three mythological animals are found in two Middle Kingdom tombs (2040-1640 BC) at Beni Hasan, tombs 15 of Baqt III and 17 of Khety (see Fig. 21). The Seth animal is shown standing along with an animal with four legs, a long tail and the head and neck of a snake, reminiscent of the serpopard, and an animal with a falcon’s head and wings, a griffin.\textsuperscript{23} It has been suggested that the Seth animal is a type of griffin or a creature closely related to it.\textsuperscript{24} Not only is the Seth animal depicted with two other mythological creatures, but also these three creatures only appear in scenes of the desert or chaos.

Very similar to the hippopotamus, Seth was not only viewed in a negative, destructive light. Although he was associated with chaos and disorder, he was also depicted with Horus in order to symbolize the unity of Upper and Lower Egypt. Not only did the image of Seth represent the entire southern half of the Egyptian country, but kings also identified with him. In the Second Dynasty (2770-2649 BC) Khasekhemwy added Seth to the top of his serekh, the rectangular, stylized palace-facade enclosing one of his royal names. What exactly this meant, a tie to the chaos god or the depiction of a shifting geopolitical climate, is unclear. Seth was also worshipped as a god, and did not truly become despised and hated until very late into the Third Intermediate Period (1070-712 BC) when he acquired a very close association with foreigners.\textsuperscript{25}

\textsuperscript{23} Te Velde, \textit{Seth, God of Confusion}, 15.


\textsuperscript{25} Te Velde, “Seth”, 910.
Characteristics of Apophis

Even though the ancient Egyptians recognized some animals, such as hippopotami, as chaos animals and believed in the chaos deity Seth, Apophis represented the ultimate threat to the sacred order of the ancient Egyptian universe.\textsuperscript{26} The divine principle of \textit{Ma’at}, “order, control, and balance” was all-important to the Ancient Egyptians. The greatest duty of the king was to uphold \textit{Ma’at} and maintain the structured order that was the ancient Egyptian civilization.\textsuperscript{27} There was no larger deity or demon that was a greater threat to this than Apophis.

Apophis was thought to be a long serpent demon, some texts attribute to him a length of 120 cubits. He was a powerful demon who sought each night to stop the solar boat’s journey through the netherworld on its path to the dawn of the next morning.\textsuperscript{28} If Apophis would have achieved his goal and stopped or destroyed the solar boat, it would mean the cataclysmic end to \textit{Ma’at}, civilization as the Egyptians knew it, and their entire, ordered world. The sun would no longer rise and the world would perish.

In combination with his attacks on the solar barque, Apophis’ physical characteristics suggest a chaotic demon. Following an analysis of his name and physical descriptions, Morenz concludes that, “Apophis (is) an antisocial creature

\textsuperscript{26} Erik Hornung and Alexander Badawy, “Apophis (Gott),” \textit{Lexikon der Ägyptologie}, vol. I, (Germany, Otto Harrassowitz, 1975), 350.

\textsuperscript{27} Emily Teeter. \textit{The Presentation of Maat: Ritual and Legitimacy in Ancient Egypt} (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1997), 34.

\textsuperscript{28} Te Velde, \textit{Seth, God of Confusion}, 104.
without any proper sensory organs." For a society so fixated on structure and order, Apophis, the enormous, babbling snake that was only concerned with destruction, and could not be communicated with, would have been the definition of terror. Apophis is the manifestation of evil and danger.

Apophis’ first physical depiction is in the Coffin Texts of the Middle Kingdom. He is depicted as being repelled from three boats, which are probably represented solar boats. This, combined with his first textual mention of famine associated with the “sandbanks of Apophis” from the First Intermediate Period (see Chapter Two), displays the ancient Egyptians’ identification of Apophis as one who attempts to disrupt the physical and mythological order of the world. He becomes much more prevalent of a figure in the New Kingdom (1550-1070 BC), in scenes such as this one from the Book of the Dead (see Fig. 5), as well as scenes from the Amduat (see Fig. 6), Book of Gates (see Fig. 8) and other New Kingdom Books of the Netherworld.

The Magic of Apophis

Apophis, who is confronted by deities with potent magic, possesses magical powers of his own. The Coffin Texts refer to evil magic used by demons and Apophis employs the use of several magical spells and abilities. The eye of Apophis was regarded with particular dread. Chapter 108 of the Book of the Dead


30 Beatrice Laura Goff, Symbols of Ancient Egypt in the Late Period (New York, Mouton Publishers, 1979), 171.


32 Robert Ritner, The Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice, 21 and 34.
Dead describes how the crew of the solar boat was overwhelmed by the glance of his eye.\(^{33}\) The eye of a snake, who can be taken as Apophis, is also mentioned as being able to hypnotize the crew of the solar boat. It is only Seth who can stand up to the evil eye and defend the solar boat.\(^{34}\) This is one of the earliest examples of Seth defending the solar boat. The motif will be discussed later in this chapter. “From all of this, it may be clear that one of the terrible weapons to be feared from the demon of chaos is his malevolent eye. When the sun boat would be caught by its glance, a cosmic calamity might be the result.”\(^{35}\)

**The Defense of the Solar Barque**

The treatment of Apophis in the four scenes mentioned in the first chapter (Figures 5-9) shows the great fear that the ancient Egyptians held for the powerful snake demon and the extent to which they would go to ensure that he would not be victorious in his assault on the solar boat. Very powerful gods, such as Isis and Atum, have been depicted preventing Apophis from destroying the solar boat and bringing about the destruction of the world. Every night the sun made its trip through the netherworld in its path towards the new day, and every night Apophis had to be stopped from destroying the sun and the world.

**A Depiction of Spell 39 of the Book of the Dead**

The importance of the motif of defending the solar barque from Apophis’ attack cannot be overstated. However, occasionally the god of chaos Seth,

---

\(^{33}\) Faulkner, *Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead*, 119-120.


\(^{35}\) Ibid, 121.
appears to confront and defeat Apophis. One such example can be found on a papyrus with a depiction of Spell 39 of the Book of the Dead (see Fig. 5).  

This depiction is thematically rich. The scene depicts the deceased, a woman named Heruben, worshipping the solar god as he travels across the night sky in his sacred barque. What makes this scene strikingly different from the other Apophis-Solar Boat scenes is that the figure defending the solar boat is the god Seth. In this scene, Seth is standing on the prow of the boat, his arms raised above his head as he drives a spear into Apophis' mouth. He is depicted with the head of the traditional Seth animal and the body of a man, wearing only a kilt, belt, and tripartite wig. He is not noticeably colored in any way, only outlined in black. In order for the complexity of this confrontation to be properly discussed, the history of Horus and Seth must be discussed along with the depictions of several other iconographic themes evident in this scene.

**Boating and Spear Hunting Scenes**

This boating scene is not one that is unique to the Book of the Dead. It is one that reaches back through ancient Egyptian history. From the Predynastic Period, boats were a very common theme in ancient Egyptian art. One of the earliest representations of boat scenes in ancient Egypt is from a pottery vessel dating to the Naqada II Period, 3600-3100 BC (see Fig. 22). A large boat carrying one male and one female figure is painted onto the side of the vessel. The ancient Egyptians believed that the sun traveled across the sky each day,

---

36 Egyptian Museum, Cairo, SR 1/10254.

and through the netherworld each night, on a solar boat, like the one in this scene. The Nile River was the ancient Egyptians’ lifeline, the source of food, the bringer of fertile soil for agriculture, and the facilitator of trade and travel. It should not come as a surprise then, that boating scenes continue to be dominant in all phases of Egyptian art.

The motif of spear-hunting from the prow of a boat is also very prevalent in ancient Egyptian art. It displays control over chaos and the taming of the wild. The ancient Egyptians believed that “the power of a ruler was proportionate to, and manifested itself in, his capacity to assert himself against his enemy.”

Scenes like this one can be found in many tombs of officials and royals in Egypt. The Mastaba of Ti at Saqqara has one such scene, wherein Ti overlooks his servants spearing hippopotami in the marsh (see Fig. 23). Another object, a golden statue from the tomb of Tutankhamun, shows the king standing on a small boat with his spear drawn, ready to attack whatever foe awaits him (see Fig. 24). These spear-hunting scenes show the ability of the spear-hunter to defeat the powers of chaos, like the hippopotamus, that existed in the Nile and marsh lands. Ancient Egyptians preferred to use familiar themes and in their art, and this scene of Seth thrusting his spear out at an attacking Apophis shows the continuation of the same theme of the victory over chaos and the maintenance of order.


39 Egyptian Museum, Cairo, JE 60710.
The Battle of Apophis and Seth

The appearance of Seth, god of chaos, as a protector of the solar boat is nevertheless both perplexing and intriguing. Why would Seth stand up for order and protect Re-Horakhty against the greatest representation of apocalyptic chaos and destruction the ancient Egyptians could conjure?

There have been several theories presented as to the reasoning for Seth’s defense of the solar barque. First, an analysis of Seth’s speech in the spell should be presented. Seth says in the text of Spell 39 of the Book of the Dead:

O Apep, you enemy of Re. Opposition is made against you, O you whom Re hates when he looks at you. Get back! You shall be decapitated with a knife, your face shall be cut away all round, your head shall be removed by him who is in his land, your bones shall be broken, your limbs shall be cut off; the earth-god has condemned you, O Apep, you enemy of Re…. For I am Seth, who can raise a tumult of storm in the horizon of the sky like one whose will is destruction.40

There is no doubt as to what Seth’s function is in this spell. There is no evidence he has been forced to come forth and stop Apophis’ attack by Re-Horakhty. He is ready to fight and knows he will destroy Apophis. This is the brash, chaotic, and fierce warrior who is renowned for his strength and power. With his spear he will assuredly drive Apophis back, ensuring safe passage for the sun god and his sacred barque. Seth was fully capable of stopping Apophis; that much is not in question. What must be investigated, however, is why the Egyptians would choose Seth instead of Isis, Atum, or any of the other powerful and capable deities that had been previously depicted in these scenes,

---

40 Faulkner, Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead, 68.
especially when it may seem counterintuitive to Seth’s character to protect the sun god.

The Differences between Apophis and Seth

The concept of the battle between Seth and Apophis illustrates a deliberate choice by the ancient Egyptians. There have been several ideas suggested as to why Seth appears as a defender of the solar boat. Te Velde discusses the theory that Seth’s defense of the solar boat could have evolved from a time when Seth might have been viewed as a very early solar deity or as a violent aspect of Re. He rejects this, however, because there is some, but very little, evidence up to this point in ancient Egyptian history to support this theory.41

Both scholars, Hornung and te Velde agree that Apophis stands for the complete and total destruction of Egyptian life and culture and that Seth defends the solar boat, for at the very least, to show his ferocious nature and defend the balance of order of which he is a part.

In order to attempt to understand what meaning may be behind this scene, a clear distinction must be made between what Apophis and Seth represent. Hornung, states that Apophis “does not belong in the realm of the existent gods, and has no beginning or end.” He also notes that it is not until late in ancient Egyptian history that an official origin story for Apophis was written. In this story he was spat out by the goddess Neith in the primeval waters and there, he immediately revolts and becomes the embodiment of destruction and chaos.42

41 Te Velde, Seth, God of Confusion, 107.

42 Erik Hornung, Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt, 178.
Seth has always been associated with chaotic places in the Egyptian cosmos, such as foreign lands and the desert. However, he is part of the cosmology of the ancient Egyptians. He is a member of the Ennead and the brother of Osiris, Isis, and Nephthys. Even with Seth’s immense power and associations with chaos, he is part of the preservation of the concept of order; his chaos is balanced by Horus’s order. Apophis is not concerned with the preservation of the cosmos of the gods and men of ancient Egypt. His sole mission is to destroy. Apophis’ attack is an attack on the entire realm of Egyptian existence, one that even threatens the chaotic Seth.

Seth and Apophis represent different types of chaos: Seth is a form of chaos that balances Horus and preserved order, whereas Apophis is total chaos and destruction. Seth has his counter in Horus. Apophis’ counter, if it can even be called one, is the entirety of the Egyptian gods, Isis, Atum, Seth, and more. The most potent magic and the fiercest warriors must be employed to prevent Apophis from destroying the world.

**Physical World Parallels to the Rise of Apophis**

It is important to not only consider the mythical netherworld where this battle of chaos and order takes place, but also the real world of the ancient Egyptians. Perhaps significant, Hornung notes that the first examples of Seth fighting Apophis come from the time when part of Egypt was ruled by foreigners, the Hyksos Period (1640-1532 BC). The Hyksos were an Asiatic people that

---

43 Ibid., 179.

took over Lower Egypt during the Second Intermediate Period.\textsuperscript{45} The Ancient Egyptians would have no doubt felt threatened by this new incursion of foreign peoples. It cannot be taken as a coincidence that Upper Egypt, associated with Seth, was the region that overthrew the Hyksos and united the two lands once again. However, new and continuous foreign threats would infringe on and eventually take over.

From the earliest appearances of Apophis in texts of the First Intermediate Period (2134-2040 BC) and Middle Kingdom (2040-1640 BC) growing pressure from outside forces continued to threaten the ancient Egyptians. The constant external threats to Egypt beginning in the Second Intermediate Period (1640-1532 BC) would continue until the end of dynastic rule. It seems that these new and growing threats mirror the rise of the importance of Apophis in Egyptian cosmology. Seth, the powerful god of chaos, would need to help defeat Apophis, the outside threat to the Egyptian cosmology and life in the real world.

Even as it is seemingly contrary to Seth’s chaotic character, this is in fact one of the few times he is ever depicted as a protector or “good” character, although to interpret his appearance in this scene as “good” is troublesome. At the very least, Seth appears because of his reputation as a fierce warrior, and he help and defend the sun god, whether that is supposed to be inferred as a “good deed” is another argument altogether.

Summary

No matter the intended meaning of his actions in this scene, Seth must defeat Apophis to avoid the cataclysmic end to the ancient Egyptian world. Seth, the outsider, god of chaos, who was renowned for his strength, aggressiveness, and viciousness, would even take up his spear not necessarily to protect any one god, but to protect the world as the Ancient Egyptians knew it. This depiction of Spell 39 of the Book of the Dead is one in which the incredible importance of the continuation of the solar cycle and preservation of order can be understood. Seth was a god of chaos, balanced chaos, but Apophis was the ultimate representation of true, apocalyptic chaos in ancient Egypt.
Chapter Five: Conclusions

In this study, the physical representations of snakes were examined to determine some of their common forms and contexts in ancient Egyptian culture. The cobra and horned viper were both positively identified and a possible identification of the Apophis serpent as an African rock python was suggested.

Snakes can be identified in ancient Egyptian art dating as early as the Predynastic Period (5000-2920 BC). The Narmer Palette, JE 14716 (ca. 3000 BC) depicts two serpopards with intertwined necks (see Fig. 24). These serpopards have the body of a large cat and a long serpent-like neck. Both of these serpopards are being controlled by men who hold ropes that are tied around their neck. Not only is this an early identification of serpent characteristics within the mythological realm, but it is an early identifier of serpents with the qualities they later became regularly identifiable: power and as in the case of Apophis, chaos.

Snakes became increasingly popular in the text, sculpture, and relief produced by the ancient Egyptians. A discussion of the major serpent deities Meretseger, Renenutet, and Wadjet, as well as serpents such as the uraeus, ouroboros, and mehen revealed several major characteristics of the icon of the serpent in ancient Egypt. The one link that binds all of these figures together in the mythology of the ancient Egyptians is the concept of enduring power. Whether in the realm of everyday life, the netherworld, or beyond the destruction of the end of the world, the powerful serpent would endure. Serpents were believed to be protective forces in the cosmos and they were often associated
with regeneration and fecundity. This was not, however, always the case. As was discussed in the end of Chapter Three, the immense power believed to be held by the icon of the serpent could be interpreted as a destructive, chaotic force.

Depictions of the Books of the Netherworld abound with innumerable snakes of all different appearances and characteristics. Although Apophis regularly appears in these New Kingdom texts, his first mention was in the First Intermediate Period tomb of Ankhtifi (ca. 2100 BC). The casual manner in which the “sandbanks of Apophis” were mentioned suggests a general understanding of Apophis’ characteristics, even at this early time. Morenz suggests that this indicates that Apophis may have been a mythical figure that originated with the common people and was transferred over to the religion of the elite, such as the nomarch Ankhtifi.¹ This seems to be a very valid argument because a lack of any other mention indicates that at least a portion of the literate, elite ancient Egyptians were familiar with Apophis by the First Intermediate Period.

From this original mention of Apophis, the serpent demon became an increasingly significant figure until he became a central figure in the New Kingdom Books of the Netherworld where he attempts to mount an assault on the solar barque as it passes through the netherworld each night. Apophis was not the only force of chaos believed in by the ancient Egyptians. The hippopotamus are an example of a chaos animal. These animals were used often by the ancient Egyptians to represent chaos. In scenes where these

¹ Morenz, “Apophis,” 201.
animals were represented, they are often hunted or incapacitated in some way. These scenes show the necessity of the ancient Egyptians to control the chaos that they believed surrounded them at all times.

The association between Seth and hippopotami, highlights the chaotic characteristics both were believed to embody. Seth was believed to be a powerful warrior and was the murderer of Osiris, but joined forces with the sun god to combat Apophis. This is a rare scene where Seth is shown as a benevolent, protective force. I believe this is the definitive example of the extreme danger that Apophis represented.

There was no greater threat to the ancient Egyptians’ structured cosmos than Apophis’ assault on the solar boat. Here, the serpent, an icon endowed with incredible, enduring power, has turned on the ancient Egyptians and threatened to prevent the sun from rising, bringing about the end of the world as they knew it. In the scenes, however, Seth, who was a god of chaos, was sometimes represented as protecting the sun god. This can be interpreted to mean that Seth, even though a chaos god, was part of the balance of ancient Egypt, whereas Apophis represented a force entirely outside of this balance and utter destruction.

The ancient Egyptians believed chaos to be all around them, especially in the form of the peoples and land that existed outside of their borders. As the dynasties passed, Egypt was in constant contact with these outside forces, either as a conqueror or, as in the case of Hyksos, an invaded land. I would suggest that as these forces grew in strength all around them, the ancient Egyptians
interpreted these threats as Apophis, who also grew in significance after the Hyksos period (1640-1532 BC).

Apophis’ specific characteristics cannot be overlooked in interpreting his significance. He was believed to have powerful magic and a threatening eye that only Seth could resist. He may have been believed to be blind and only spoke through incoherent babbling. It does seem that his senses are not as they should be. These features suggest that the ancient Egyptians understood him to be unpredictable and wild, pure chaos, which would be the ultimate antithesis to the structured order of ancient Egyptian society.

If Apophis were to succeed in his assault to halt the solar barque, it would bring about the end of Egyptian civilization. This fear could easily have been rooted in the fear of the world outside of Egypt, the chaotic lands where the principles of Ma’at do not apply. The ancient Egyptians world was built on order and structure. Apophis, a massive supernatural serpent, the icon of enduring strength and power, would represent the greatest possible threat to the sacred land of Egypt.
Bibliography


Figures

I 9 ♂ horned viper (*Cerastes cornutus*)

For ♂ see P 9. For ♂ see S 30.

10 ♂ cobra in repose (*Naja haje*, Gk. ἀσπίς)

11 ♂ two cobras ♂ I 10

For ♂ see M 14. For ♂ see T 5.

12 ♂ cobra (erect as on the forehead of the Pharaoh)

13 ♂ cobra ♂ I 12 on the basket ‹ V 30

14 ♂ snake

15 ♂ alternative form of last

Figure 1: Serpent signs from Gardiner's sign list
**Figure 2:** Ouroboros surrounding Harpocrates

Reprinted from Erik Hornung, *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt*, fig. 18.

**Figure 3:** Serpent wand at the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge (E.63.1896)

Source: http://www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/opac/search/cataloguedetail.html?&prref=49493
**Figure 4**: *Cippus* Stela from the Walters Art Museum (22.335)

Figure 5: Papyrus of Heruben, SR 1/10254.

Figure 6: Seventh hour of the *Amduat* from the tomb of Thuthmosis III (KV 34)
**Figure 7:** Scene from the *Book of Day* in the tomb of Ramses VI (KV 9)
Reprinted from Erik Hornung, *The Valley of the Kings: Horizon of Eternity*, 112.

**Figure 8:** Scene from the *Book of Gates*, Third Hour from the tomb of Seti I (KV 17)
Reprinted from Erik Hornung, *The Valley of the Kings: Horizon of Eternity*, 143.
Figure 9: Scene from Book of Gates, Sixth Hour from the tomb of Seti I (KV 17)

Reprinted from Erik Hornung, The Valley of the Kings: Horizon of Eternity, 112.
Figure 10: Meretseger as a recumbent lion with human head (OIM 11107)

Reprinted from Harry W. Cartwright, “The Iconography of Certain Egyptian Divinities as Illustrated by the Collections in Haskell Oriental Museum,” fig. 15.

Figure 11: Setau, viceroy of Kush, offering to Renenutet in the form of a cobra with horns and a sun disk

Figure 12: Wadjet and her counterpart Nekhbet as part of the titulary of King Djoser

Reprinted from Patrick Houlihan, *The Animal World of the Pharaohs*, fig. 123.
Figure 13: Uraeus with Nekhbet on the gold mask of Tutankhamun

Source:
http://www.globalegyptianmuseum.org/large.aspx?img=images/EMC/3324_800x800.jpg
Figure 14: *Mehen* snake from the Tomb of Seti I (KV 17)

Reprinted from Erik Hornung, *The Valley of the Kings: Horizon of Eternity*, 143

Figure 15: Naqada I bowl with Hippopotami

Source:
http://www.mfa.org/collections/search_art.asp?recview=true&id=46880
**Figure 16:** Speared Hippos from the Mastaba of Ti at Saqqara, Fifth Dynasty
Reprinted from Patrick Houlihan, *The Animal World of the Pharaohs*, fig. 94.

**Figure 17:** Line drawing of speared and bound hippos from the Mortuary Temple of Pepi II at Saqqara
Figure 18: Mother hippo protecting her calf
Reprinted from Patrick Houlihan, *The Animal World of the Pharaohs*, Pl. x.

Figure 19: Gold Hippo Amulet
Source: http://www.mfa.org/collections/search_art.asp?recview=true&id=146182
Figure 20: Standard depictions of the Seth animal
Reprinted from Herman Te Velde, *Seth, God of Confusion*, fig. 6.

Figure 21: The Seth animal and mythological animals from Tomb 15, Baqt III, and 17, Khety, at Beni Hasan
Reprinted from Herman Te Velde, *Seth, God of Confusion*, fig. 5.
Figure 22: Pottery vessel with boating scene from El-Amra

Figure 23: Hippo hunt scene from Mastaba of Ti at Saqqara
Reprinted from Patrick Houlihan, *The Animal World of the Pharaohs*, fig. 94.
Figure 24: Tutankhamun spear hunting

Source: http://www.globalegyptianmuseum.org/record.aspx?id=14821
Figure 25: Serpopards on the Narmer Palette

Source: http://www.globalegyptianmuseum.org/record.aspx?id=15311