Reviving Ophidia: Godly Serpents in Ancient Egyptian Magic and Mythology

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Reviving Ophidia: Godly Serpents in Ancient Egyptian
Magic and Mythology

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Abstract

In this thesis, I examine the positive and negative roles and representations of the serpent as it pertains to gods and goddesses in ancient Egyptian magic and myth. The evidence provides salient insight into the complex relationship that Egypt had with this creature, and revive an ancient appreciation for the serpent as more than something to fear and loathe.

Since ancient peoples both dreaded and were filled with awe at the snake because of its murderous capabilities and apparent capacity for rejuvenation, they chose both to repel and revere them in daily life. This study provides a deeper understanding of the perception of these creatures based on textual and artistic depictions of snakes as associated with mythological stories, and with particular emphasis on Egyptian divinities. I shall describe snakes and serpent-associated deities primarily in the religious spheres of this culture and analyze them according to their protective and/or menacing roles. I have collected much of the available textual and material evidence that represents or bears serpents that relate to godly myths and magic.

Key Terms

amulet; chaos; healing; healing serpent; magic; magician; medicine; mythology; protection; protective serpent; serpent; snake
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List of Abbreviations

BAAM = Bibliotheca Alexandrina Antiquities Museum
BD = Book of the Dead
BG = Book of Gates
BM = Brooklyn Museum
BSAE = British School of Archaeology in Egypt
BRP = Bremner-Rhind Papyrus
CT = Coffin Texts
JHAM = Johns Hopkins Archaeological Museum
MMA = Metropolitan Museum of Art
PT = Pyramid Texts
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I. Introduction

Snakes are generally perceived in enigmatic ways in modern society: perilous and to be avoided at all costs, or intriguing because of the air of danger and mystique that surrounds them. The response to this potential of death differs: as some people are curious and fascinated by being close to something that has the reputation of causing harm, while others stay far away. Although the ancient Egyptians experienced similar tenuous relationships with serpents, still they revered them as figures of protection and healing. This strongly indicates the importance and relevance of these creatures in the daily lives of this culture.

The Egyptians probably used elements of nature to gain a sense of control over their hostile environment. The snake, an apex predator, clearly drew their attention. They feared this creature because of its uncanny ability to kill with such rapidity. Many Egyptian myths incorporated evil zoomorphic deities, and they went so far as to develop magical spells and protective amulets to deter the reptiles and protect the living and dead alike, as one finds in both the Pyramid Texts and the Book of the Dead. The Egyptians recognized the serpent as a deadly creature, but they also saw them as concomitant symbols of protection, healing, fertility, and immortality, as evidenced in various ancient texts and artifacts such as healing cippi, protective amulets, and the uraeus snake on the forefront of the pharaoh’s crown. The sense of fear that the snake evoked was an integral part of its appeal as a figure of protection. The ancient Egyptians utilized the serpent’s methods of self-preservation and transformed it into a symbol of defense and conservation through violence and death. Many divinities that the Egyptians revered were associated with serpents and possessed elements of protection, healing, and longevity, all of
which suggests that the Egyptians did not perceive the snake as something only of which to be frightened.

I analyze the positive and negative roles of this creature through an examination of anthropomorphic deities and deities with serpent aspects and associations within mythological texts and artwork. I explicate the ancient Egyptian mythologies of this creature to shed light on the serpent as a prominent and complex symbol that was vital to Egypt’s life view. This thesis illuminates ancient Egyptian attitudes toward the snake and further proves that serpent worship was based on more than fear.

We cannot impose our modern beliefs and perceptions regarding snakes on the minds of the ancient Egyptians. We are from a different point in time and cannot assume that our views are identical. What we know about this ancient culture is based on what has been discovered and excavated so far. There are, of course, countless untouched sites that have yet to be located, meaning that there are gaps in our knowledge of the ancient record. Although we may never gain an entirely accurate view, we can try to piece the picture together based on the material remains that have survived.
II. Fear and the Brain

The body’s alarm circuit for fear lies in two almond-shaped clusters of nuclei imbedded deep in the temporal lobes of the brain. The amygdala, which is derived from the ancient Greek ἀμυγδάλη, meaning “almond” due to its shape, controls involuntary responses associated with fear, arousal, and emotional stimulation. These nucleic masses are essential to our ability to feel certain emotions and to perceive them in other people. Fear and anxiety are markedly different emotions, despite the common perception that they are synonymous. According to Daniel R. Weinberger of the National Institute of Mental Health’s Clinical Brain Disorders Branch, fear is a physical response to danger, while anxiety is a psychological response to perceived danger.

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specific stimulus triggers a fear response (e.g. seeing a snake in the grass). Anxiety, which is not necessarily tied to a specific stimulus, is a feeling of being at risk, but from no impending danger.

The amygdala allows us to react almost instantly to a situation or environment in which we sense an imminent threat. It starts with a sensory stimulus, such as seeing a strange shape or hearing an ominous sound. The stimulus is first processed by the thalamus; from here there are two possible neural pathways in the brain, which American neuroscientist Joseph E. LeDoux dubbed the “high road” and the “low road”. The low road transmits a signal from the thalamus to the amygdala, which then activates an immediate fear-response in the body. This sequence works subconsciously, meaning the subject reacts without awareness of what the stimulus is. The low road is a baser instinct that all animals possess. For example, a man is hiking in the woods. He sees a large log and lifts his leg to step over it when he sees an unexpected long, thin, curved shape. In less than a second, this mysterious shape is processed by his thalamus and by the amygdala, which triggers a fear-response in the man. He may flinch, yell, or leap back before consciously evaluating his environment for a threat. As we explore just some of the endless amounts of evidence in this thesis, we see proof that the ancient Egyptians were generally afraid of snakes. Of course we cannot assume that all ancient Egyptians’ negative responses to snakes were the same, just as we cannot say that all modern people view and behave toward serpents in the same way. What we do know is that we share the same biological make-up as the ancient Egyptians, so we can operate under the assumption that their unconscious fearful reactions to

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these stimuli were similar to ours.

In more developed animals, the high road is activated simultaneously to provide conscious awareness of the stimulus. This is a slower road which sends the message from the thalamus to the appropriate sensory cortex (e.g. visual cortex, auditory cortex, etc.) and then on to the amygdala. The “high road” also includes the cerebral cortex, which is associated with more advanced brain function (i.e. thought and action), thus creating a conscious impression of what the stimulus is. The hiker steps over that log and is confronted by a suspicious mass. It is processed by the thalamus, sent to his visual cortex, which is where he realizes that the shape is a coiled snake. The information is then directed to his amygdala, which then triggers the fear-response in his body, assuming there is a threat. The relayed information causes the man’s heart rate and blood pressure to increase and muscles to contract so he is ready to flee if necessary. If, however, the cortex determines that the stimulus was not in fact a snake, but a harmless stick, the message to the amygdala would suppress the fear response and the man would be on his way.

(Fig. 2)
2.1 Repulsion and Attraction

Specific animal phobia is characterized by excessive and unreasonable fear, escape, and avoidance behaviors (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). Psychiatric research studies conducted by Uppsala University in Sweden surveyed sixteen right-handed females with specific phobias of either snakes or spiders who were exposed to pictures of both alongside other random images to induce fear in order to study brain activity. As one would expect, distress ratings were higher during the phobic than the non-phobic stimulation.

Some experts assert that ophidiophobia is a result of an evolutionary survival mechanism—that is, natural selection—brought on by the millennia-old battle between man and beast. Though controversial, a growing number of theorists argue that our brains come with some intrinsic belief content (e.g. “snakes are bad”). Despite new experiences, phobias are resistant to change, suggesting that they are closed information systems—i.e. systems that are closed off from the outside environment, and all interaction and knowledge is transmitted within the closed system only. So, even after a phobic person is told that a snake is not venomous, they still fear handling the reptile (Asma 2009:4). “Monsters” seem opposed to disappearing, no matter how much we illuminate the subject. And yet, we are still quite taken with them, as evidenced by our fascination with deviation from normality and ‘otherness’. We cannot “resist taking a momentary peep [...] at the dreadful object lying quietly at the bottom”.

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The ancient Egyptians shared those thoughts; they both feared and were filled with awe of serpents because of their murderous abilities and apparent capacity for rejuvenation, and thus chose to both repel and revere them in daily life. Venomous snakes were particularly challenging to incorporate into *Maat*—the order of the universe. The Egyptians’ solution was to control them via magic. Multiple gods and goddesses with protective elements became associated with serpents in some way. The pharaoh, for example, wore the *uraeus* on his crown as a mode of protection, and Wadjet, the goddess of childbirth and protector of children, was often depicted as a snake-headed woman (Berger 2007:95). Magic and religion served the purpose of neutralizing undesirable aspects of snakes and ultimately turning their powerful potential around to serve mankind.
III. The Chaotic Serpent

3.0 Introduction

Ancient Near Eastern mythologies often represented chaos in serpentine form, likely because of ancient attitudes towards this creature. This section discusses serpents and serpent-associated deities that embodied chaos and devilry and disrupted the order around them on a universal scale down to the individual level. Humans’ fear of snakes and dread of disorder made the serpent an excellent representation of the hostile forces that constantly surrounded them. According to Golding (2013:87), naturally occurring biological anomalies in snakes, e.g. having legs or two heads, combined with fear and human imagination, begot many myths and iconographic depictions of serpent monsters and entities of chaos. The negative roles and perceptions of serpents will be examined in this section, from threats to world order and health to identification of venomous snakes, which showed the Egyptians’ hypervigilance regarding bites.

3.1 The Serpent as a Threat to Order

In several ancient Near Eastern cosmogonies the primordial world was chaotic—the pre-ordered state of the cosmos (Beal 2002:14). In the Hermopolitan version of the ancient Egyptian cosmogony, there first existed the Ogdoad—four frog-headed gods and four snake-headed goddesses who resided in a watery mass of dark, directionless chaos. Nun and his partner Naunet, Heh and Hauhet, Kek and Kauket, and Amun and Amaunet all cohabitated in the primeval waters where they represented chaos, infinity, darkness, and hiddenness (Tyldesley 2013:58-59). In some way or another, Ra, the fiery sun, emerged and created all other things.
Chaos is rather often represented by the demonic and/or serpentine creatures of the primordial universe as seen with the Ogdoad or more sinisterly with Apophis\(^7\). With the creation of all things rose the demon-snake, who in some other versions of the creation myth came into being with creation simultaneously, while in others he also resided in the primeval waters. As a natural enemy of order, Apophis and Maat existed in opposition, each trying to overturn the other in battle (Girardot 1987:1538). Since order had to be maintained, there was a continual war between chaos and order.

3.2 Chaotic Serpents

3.2.1 Apophis

Apophis was the nemesis of the sun god, Ra, and the embodiment of darkness and chaos. Although he was believed to have existed since the beginning of time in the primeval waters that preceded creation, iconographic and written records of Apophis do not appear before the Middle Kingdom; they seem to have arisen in the fearful and uncertain times which marked the First Intermediate Period (Wilkinson 2003:221). New Kingdom funerary texts provide most of the evidence of Apophis’ mythology. *The Book of Gates*\(^8\) is a cosmological text describing the architecture and inhabitants of the *Amduat*, the underworld through which the boat of the sun

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\(^7\) As no ancient Egyptian texts explain why Apophis took serpent form (and how could they given that he technically existed long before the ancient Egyptians and was thus so ancient that people simply accepted this fact without question). In reality, Prehistoric Egyptians created several cosmogonies based on what was happening in their natural environments. They saw serpents and feared them, and the creation of Apophis likely reflected their feelings toward these deadly creatures. Over time, the mystique of Apophis became shrouded in mythology and thus many biological snakes were seen as representations of Apophis.

god, Ra, travels during the night. It describes the events of each hour, including Ra and Apophis’ epic battle.

Ra reaches the gate of Tchetbi in Hour Three; the first appearance of Apophis is here, but he is restrained by Atum and nine Tchatcha, the divine chiefs at the court of Osiris (Fig. 3). Apophis reappears in Hour Five, this time fettered by twelve gods who call themselves “those who hold Ennutchi [Apep]”. Ra advances past the demon and unites with Osiris, king of the underworld.

In some stories, Apophis is likened to Set, the god of chaos, yet in some texts, including this one, Set stands under the bow of the sun god’s barque to repel the giant serpent. In this book, each night Apophis succeeds in hypnotizing Ra and his protective entourage except for Set, who resists the serpent’s deadly stare, probably because of his association with snakes and chaos, and either charms Apophis or repulses him with the thrust of a great spear (Fig. 4) (McCarter 2011:22). In some versions, the great serpent also obstructs the passage of the barque by choking the waters of the underworld river.

Other deities are also involved in Apophis’ defeat, namely Isis, Neith, and Serket, who successfully captured the monster with magical nets. He is then restrained by deities including the earth god, Geb, and the sons of Horus, and his body cut into pieces—only to resurrect again during the day. In some versions of the myth, Ra is actually swallowed by the serpent who later regurgitates him as a metaphor of rebirth and renewal (Wilkinson 2003:221). Even an entity of chaos possessed qualities of rejuvenation and rebirth, likely because of its serpentine qualities.

In various textual and iconographic depictions, Apophis is shown as a giant serpent, sometimes with tightly wound coils to emphasize his great size. He is almost always shown as
being dismembered or in the process of being destroyed, often by knives. Spell 17 in the *Book of the Dead* details how the sun god Ra takes on the form of a cat named "Mau" to kill the evil serpent Apophis.

"I am the Cat which fought near the Persea Tree in Anu on the night when the foes of Neb-er-tcher were destroyed. This male Cat is Ra himself, and he was called 'Mau' because of the speech of the god Sa, who said concerning him: 'He is like (mau) unto that which he hath made'; therefore, did the name of Ra become 'Mau’" (Sheet 14, ll. 16ff).

Cats were celebrated as snake killers—in funerary literature, Ra and Hathor would often assume the feline form with a knife in paw to chop Apophis into pieces (Figs. 5 and 6) (Pinch 1994:99; *BD 17*).

According to Hart (2005:32), however, a scene painted in the tomb of Ramesses VI, a ruler during the 12th century BC, in the Valley of the Kings shows the serpent intact with twelve heads above its back representing those it had disgorged. Although intact in this depiction, according to the *Book of Gates* Apophis was still nearing the hour of his cyclical death.

Although Apophis never had a formal cult and was never worshipped (Morenz 2004:202), he featured prominently in several stories as an evil entity against which protection was necessary. Magical texts and rituals were thus produced to combat the demon serpent. The best-preserved example of these is the fourth century BC *Bremner-Rhind Papyrus*10, which currently resides in the British Museum. It contains differing versions of a monologue by the sun god in which he describes his creation of all things. In general, however, the various compositions

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9 From the *Papyrus of Nebseni*, Brit. Mus. No. 9900, Sheet 14, ll. 16ff.

collected in this book consist of spells for the protection of the sun god from the incursions of Apophis and his followers, with a secondary purpose of protecting the pharaoh from his enemies:

Thou shalt die in the flame of fire; thou shalt be blind and the Eye of Horus shall have power over thee; it shall take away thine arms, it shall remove thy legs, and thou shalt be rendered impotent. It is Re who brings about evil in thee, it is Horus who cuts thee to pieces, thou being bound, fettered and fallen. Thy soul is sundered from thy shade, and thy head is bound variant, thy head is cut off--thy bones are cut out, thy flesh is beaten from thy body, thy soul is sundered from thy shade, and thou art senseless. Thou shalt not be, for <I> have cast thee into the fire. Lie down in pain, being turned aside and fallen at the wrath of his urea; they consume thee with the fiery blast of their mouths, and thou art (condemned) to the flame of fire; its flame is in thee, its blaze is in thee and it destroys thy out at the execution-block of the god [...] O ‘Apep thou foe of Re. Be thou spat upon, O ‘APEP—FOUR TIMES—be ye spat upon, O all ye foes of Pharaoh, dead or alive (BRP IV 31:24-27; 32:1; 32:3).

These spells for the ‘overthrowing of Apophis’ provided protection from this deity or from snakes, which could be viewed as minor yet dangerous manifestations of the monster. During the Late Period, when such a ritual book was read in temples daily to protect the world from the threat of the sun god’s arch enemy, a wax model of the serpent was cut into pieces and burnt with fire (Kousoulis 2001:30). Other spells used to protect against Apophis involved drawing a picture of the serpent on a piece of papyrus, then sealing it in a box that was spat upon and set on fire:

To be recited over (an image of) ‘Apep made of wax with his name written on it in green ink; he shall also be made on a new sheet of papyrus...[which] shall be spat upon and trampled with thy left foot, slaughtered with a knife, put on a fire of bryony and quenched with the urine of a...woman (BRP V: 14–15).

3.2.2 Set (Seth)

Set, the ‘Red One’, was an ancient Egyptian god of the desert, storms, foreigners, chaos, and violence\textsuperscript{11}. While Apophis was the true antithesis of \textit{maat} (truth, order), Set also often found himself opposed to order in the universe. As a god of the desert or ‘Red Land’, he was a natural

threat to the growth and vegetation upon which life itself depended; and as the adversary of Osiris, the rightful king of Egypt, he represented rebellion and strife\textsuperscript{12}.

Unlike Apophis, Set is attested from as early as the Naqada I Period (4000-3500 BC) illustrated by the fact that Peribsen\textsuperscript{13} and Khasekhemwy, rulers during Egypt’s mysterious Second Dynasty, possessed serekhs (a specific type of ancient Egyptian crest in which a royal name was inscribed) topped by Set-animals (Turner 2012:7) (Figs. 7 and 8). The famous Scorpion macehead also depicts the Set-animal on a standard held by one of the high officers of King Scorpion II\textsuperscript{14} (Najovits 2003:162).

Set’s importance in the Old Kingdom is evidenced in the Pyramid Texts, which contain many spells meant to protect Unas from Set’s influence in the afterlife (PT 215:142, 244:249). By the Middle Kingdom, however, he earned a position in solar theology as a god tasked with protecting Ra from Apophis on his nightly journey through the Duat (Wilkinson 2003:197). His name declined in the early New Kingdom, but rose once again during the nineteenth and twentieth dynasties and was elevated to a kind of patron deity by the Ramessid kings, some of whom added his name to their own (e.g. Seti I, literally “man of Set”, and Setnakht, literally “Set is strong”) (Hornblower 1937:156). In the Third Intermediate and Late Periods, Set’s role as god of the desert and of foreigners led to his association with the loathed Assyrians and other

\textsuperscript{12} Although the story of Osiris and Set’s mythological feud is well known, no primary sources from ancient Egypt are extant. The main ancient sources that provide an extended story are the Greek biographer Plutarch, “Isis and Osiris”, and the Greek historian Diodorus Siculus.

\textsuperscript{13} The serekh for Peribsen was found pressed in earthen jar seals made of mud and clay and in inscriptions on stone vessels. These seals and vessels were excavated from Peribsen’s tomb at Abydos and at an excavation site in Elephantine.

\textsuperscript{14} King Scorpion II was a king or chieftain that ruled Upper Egypt during the Predynastic Period. The only pictorial evidence of his existence is the Scorpion Macehead, which was uncovered by James Quibell and Frederick Green in a temple at Hierakonpolis between 1897 and 1898.
outsiders. He became vilified and abhorred, blamed for evils committed by the Assyrians (Turner 2012:118).

The character of Set was not entirely inimical, however; he was quite calculating and possessed great strength—qualities that could potentially be used for good. In the Pyramid Texts, it is the strength of Seth that the deceased pharaoh claims as his own for protective purposes (PT 1145) and many living kings linked themselves to him. Tuthmosis III called himself "beloved of Seth", for example, and Ramesses II is said to have fought like Set at the Battle of Kadesh (Lycourinos 2012:201). Set’s physical and magical prowess were also demonstrated by his resisting the evil eye of Apophis and defending Ra from the great serpent. Although Set could be identified with the chaos serpent Apophis, he also was the sun god’s defender against the same monster. The oscillating history of this god mimics his character with both negative and positive aspects.

Naqada III artwork depicts Set as a dog-like creature with a stiff, erect, and often forked tail, pricked ears, and a long nose. The creature’s coloring was usually black, though it has been known to have been a reddish color (Sandidge 2005:33-34). Modern Egyptologists generally agree that the Set-animal was never a real creature, and was instead a composite animal that may have combined jackal, aardvark, donkey, and possibly even giraffe.

Later examples of the creature from the Second Dynasty depict it standing, as in the serekh of Seth-Peribsen. Khasekhemwy’s serekh also shows the animal upright, but juxtaposed by Horus perched adjacent as a falcon wearing the double crown of Egypt (symbols of the two kingdoms). Most other instances of serekhs involving Set also bear the symbol of Horus;
Peribsen’s crest is unusual in this respect\textsuperscript{15}. Later representations often show the set-animal in a seated or crouching stance\textsuperscript{16}. The close association between Seth and the rulers of the Ramessid dynasties is also seen in monuments such as the statue of the crouching set-animal protecting Seti I (Fig. 9) in exactly the same way other rulers were portrayed beneath the figure of the Horus falcon.

Set’s pictographic form evolved yet again in the New Kingdom. He was depicted anthropomorphically with the body of a man and the head of a set-animal, though his actions and epithets remained largely the same. He has also been shown as a double-headed god alongside Horus (Fig. 10), which may have symbolized the united rulership of Upper and Lower Egypt, as well as the union of opposing forces (desert versus sky, dark versus light) to maintain balance in the world (Wilkinson 2003:197–198).

In addition to the set-animal, creatures like antelopes, hippopotami, and the donkey were also sacred to the god of chaos. A second-century relief on the walls of the temple of Horus at Edfu in southern Egypt shows Horus standing above a hippopotamus which he is in the process of spearing. His mother, Isis, is positioned protectively behind him. As one of Seth’s sacred animals, the hippopotamus represents him in this image. The temple’s hieroglyphs describe the harpooning action as \textit{wnp nhs m St-Wnpt}, ‘to pierce the donkey at the Place of the Piercing’, connecting both the hippopotamus and the donkey to Seth (Mitchell 2018:55).

\textsuperscript{15} An example of Set’s presence on a Second Dynasty \textit{serekh} of Peribsen can be found at the British Museum, EA 35597. The stela was unearthed from his tomb at Abydos.

\textsuperscript{16} Gardiner’s Sign List provides some of the hieroglyphs and/or determinatives for the set-animal (E20, E21). Gardiner, Alan H. \textit{Catalogue of the Egyptian Hieroglyphic Printing Type from Matrices owned and Controlled by Dr. Alan H. Gardiner} (Cambridge University Press, 1928).
According to Hart (2005:145), following the carving of this scene, temple priests would ritually consume “hippopotamus cake” to make certain of Seth’s non-existence. In some other cult practices, such as the one executed during the so-called “festival of seven Tybi”, the cakes would be stamped on as another way to destroy the god of chaos completely (Egberts 1997:52).

One mention of a similar ritual practice exists for the donkey as well. At Busiris, a significant cult center for the worship of Osiris, the sacrifice was symbolic: a donkey's picture was impressed upon sacrificial bread\(^1\). Though no records exist to explain what was done to this bread, it can be assumed that execration protocol was followed and the bread was destroyed either via consumption or aggressive stomping.

As they did with other representations of evil, the Egyptians took precautionary measures (e.g. spells and execration rituals) that dealt with Seth's agents in life and in death. The deceased were also equipped with spells to ward off the animals of Set in the afterlife:

Another spell for warding off the donkey. To be spoken by the Osiris N': “On your face! Do not devour me, for I am pure! I am one who has come by himself. You shall not attack me. I am one who has come because he was called. You do not know. I am the master of your mouth. Retreat before your "myrrh"! [...] “O you bald back of the head, pierce Seth!” say the existing ones...\(^{18}\)

Despite Seth’s rather hateful character, the god had several cult centers in Upper Egypt where he was often regarded as the patron deity of the region, symbolically balancing Horus in Lower Egypt. A cult center also existed in the royal city of Pi-Ramesses in the Delta. His earliest cult center was perhaps at ancient Nubt, the Greek Ombos, at the entrance to the Wadi Hammamat

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\(^1\) No scholarly sources have written about this practice at Busiris, therefore the existence of such a ritual cannot be confirmed.

\(^{18}\) After the transliteration and German translation on the Thesaurus Linguae Aegyptiae website. B. Backes ed., Totenbuchprojekt, Nordrhein-Westfälische Akademie der Wissenschaften => London BM 10793 => Tb 040.
which controlled trade to the eastern desert regions, and it was in this area that Seth was said
to have been born (Wilkinson 2003:199).

Though amulets of the god are uncommon, he was frequently invoked in magical
incantations, either as protection against other hostile foes or to counteract effects that were
relevant to Set’s own mythology. As a sort of trickster god, Set’s mischievous ways may have
 appealed to the ancient Egyptians and succeeded in justifying negativity in human nature.
Everyone has moments in which they want nothing more than to give into their desires and
create chaos.

Set was a necessary evil that was vital for the maintenance of the universe’s cosmic
balance. In his defeat of Apophis, Set restores ma’at to the world. His dual nature, driven to
destroy and defend order, made him both a slayer of monsters and the fiend who murdered his
brother (Rikala 2007:234). Overall, for many Egyptians over much of the country’s history, Seth
seems to have remained an ambivalent deity at best.

3.3 The Serpent as a Threat to Health

While chaotic demons’ and deities’ primary reason for existence was to affect cosmic order and
provide a constant threat to Ra in the underworld, the ancient Egyptians also believed that a
secondary role was to affect individual people on a personal level (Golding 2013:76). The most
dangerous threat from snakes to the ancient Egyptian’s health came from their venomous bites.

3.4 Venomous Snakes in the Brooklyn Papyrus

The ancient Egyptians were able to differentiate several different types of snakes, as seen in the
Brooklyn Papyrus, a 4,000-year-old medico-magical papyrus used to identify and treat
snakebites. Sauneron (1989) listed twenty-one different types of snakes in his French translation of the papyrus, while Nunn (1996:185-186) devised a slightly different list. Some possible species identified by the ancient Egyptians were several types of cobra (including the *Naja haje*, the model for the *uraeus*), horned viper, and asps, all of which were used by the Egyptians in their hieroglyphic writing system, tomb iconography, and for protective amulets.

### 3.5 Conclusion

The inherent fear of venomous snakes and their bites was a real issue in ancient Egypt and made the serpent an ideal target of negativity. As a dreaded creature, it was easily assigned a villainous role of disruptive chaos. All the major chaos myths in the ancient Near East also involved monstrous serpents as agents of chaos, so clearly the symbolism was widespread. Serpents were also often linked to ill health through supernatural entities that possessed serpent aspects, associations, or forms. These negative roles are almost certainly linked to the Egyptians’ fear of these creatures. As mythology was a significant part of people’s lives, the serpent became a logical appointee to represent disorder and strife in Egyptian myths.
IV. Serpents in Healing

4.0 Introduction

Many of the serpent deities that had dangerous aspects or were responsible for catastrophes or infirmity were also the ones ancient Egyptians pleaded to for healing and protective purposes. Malady was often believed to have divine origins, so logic dictated that invoking the divine would act as an effective curative method. Additionally, magic served the purpose of neutralizing undesirable aspects of snakes and ultimately turning their powerful potential around to serve mankind. Those dangerous aspects are what drew the ancient Egyptians to these creatures in the first place, so those feared characteristics could have been used for their benefit. Thus, magical texts and images that petitioned these serpent deities were employed to protect their owners from enemies, as many of the entities linked with healing were also associated with protection.

This section deals with the different approaches to healing associated with snake bites, most of which involve a combination of magic and medicine.

4.1 Defining Magic

If we are to delve properly into the world of serpents and their reception in the ancient world, we must recognize their ties to ancient magic. By definition, magic is the power of influencing events through avenues such as the written or spoken word, images, rituals, and the wearing and displaying of amulets. It was thought that certain words and images, such as the name or physical representation of a deity, contained power. Magic was deemed a legitimate source of power to ancient Near Eastern peoples that would allow the user to have some control over their life. It was typically used to maintain good health and well-being, as well as for fending off evil.
4.2 Magic and Medicine

Magic and medicine were closely connected due to the strong belief that poor health was caused by evil spirits or malicious deities (Davies 1898:242). Magic was commonly practiced alongside medicine: there were few cures for wounds that did not somehow involve magic and an appeal to a serpent deity for healing or cursing (Borghouts 1995:1777). Often magic was employed to treat a wound or a bite instead of, or in addition to, natural medicine. Employment of magic to treat a wound could involve the recitation of a spell or the use of amulets (David 2004:134). The negative entity had to be identified before magic could be used against it, as certain offenders required specific spells in order to be effective. Magic was therefore something that complemented, rather than opposed, medicine.

4.3 The Brooklyn Papyrus

As we have seen, treatment for physical ailments often included a combination of medicine and magic. The Brooklyn Papyrus, dated to ca. 525-600 BC, is an ancient manual used by physicians for the treatment of snakebites. Nunn (1996:100) believes that the handbook was used by the priests of Selqet in particular. Some of the ingredients in the remedies include parts of animals, vegetables, and minerals; sometimes the actual skin of the snake itself was used in liquid cures. A spell would usually accompany the antidotes. The papyrus describes about thirty-seven different types of snakes and treatments for their bites. This papyrus, translated by Serge Sauneron, may be the most important source of information on snakebites in ancient Egypt. It originally contained 100 paragraphs; 1-13 are missing, though it is assumed that they contained
similar material to that found in 14-37. A summary of the information compiled by Nunn (1996:185-186) is as follows:

Paragraphs 14-37:

1. Snake identification by name; physical characteristics of size, color, shape of head, neck; bite marks; behavior; reputation (i.e. the way it crawls); aggressiveness; and the snake’s state of alertness (some text is missing).
2. Effects of the bite, local symptoms (swelling, bleeding, pain, necrosis, and discoloration), and systemic symptoms (fever, vomiting, fainting, loss of strength, loss of consciousness, tetanization, possible seizures, and coma).

Paragraphs 39—100 include treatments for the snakebites described.

Snakes were often grouped together with scorpions because both were considered some of the most dangerous creatures and their venoms had similar effects on the human body. The *Brooklyn Papyrus* follows this pattern, including treatments for scorpion stings as well as snake bites. Recipe 90c calls for amber and the blood of a cat, a fish, a kite, a cobra, and a lizard to form a compress for a snake bite. As the manual used a combination of magic and medicine due to the belief that this pair provided truly powerful results, it can be inferred that the magical incantations served as psychological placebos to help the afflicted cope with their illnesses while the natural medicine did its work on the external symptoms.

Snakebites were usually thought to be from a personification of a deity, so healing spells would have been addressed accordingly. Once the source of the issue was known, steps could be taken. If the victim had not instantly perished, a magician might use special words to denigrate the appearance of the responsible party (e.g. Set) in the case of supernatural involvement in order to remove their negative influence from the victim. This is seen in Spell 41 in part two of the *Brooklyn Papyrus*:
Very good recipe for a man who has received a bite of any kind: onion. To grind finely in the beer. Absorb; rejecter; during a day. Say on it as a magic formula: One mouth (is worth against another) mouth, one tooth against (other) teeth! It is Re who watches against venom, since the mouth of the god is in the place of your mouth, his word will bring down your venom, where it is. Disappear, o venom! Come, go down to earth! I brought a tooth in my hand to chase you away. This tooth of the great god was brought, which fell on the ground when he became a teenager.

He who grows on the earth, and green in the desert will shoot you down, will cut down the trace of your mouth, will cut down the trace of your teeth. Hello to you, onion! Hello to you, Osiris’s primitive tooth! Hello to you, the only one who protects all the gods, in your name of onion! May you enter into the belly of the sons of Y. Abate any venom that is there, in the name of this onion! What is in Re's hand, kill what is in Horus’s hand, which is in Seth’s hand, in the hand of the Great Ennead! Kill their enemies, there! Deteriorate for me their head, since you wear this name of onion (the one that deteriorates); open your mouth against their mouth, since you bear the name of the one who opens his mouth.

Devour them, since you wear the name of "devourer". Protect their body (nd ltw), because you have the name of "tooth" (ndht). Oh the eye of Horus, light (hd) appeared on the earth, which strikes the rekhyt for Horus! It is certainly his name that will protect Horus from Seth’s followers. Deteriorate (hd) venom, (this) aggressor who is in the heart (lb), who is in the heart (h3ty), who is in the spleen, who is in the liver, who is [in] the lungs, who is in the throat, which is in the head, which is in the posterior, which is in every member of X son of Y. Let the brightness of your flames be against him, in order to bring him down, and let him die your bite!

The Egyptians had similar incantations for cats, as the felines apparently noticed dangerous creatures across the floors of houses and hiding in various holes and decided to investigate. Cats were celebrated as killers of snakes and scorpions—in funerary literature, Ra and Hathor would assume cat form to tear Apophis into pieces19 (Pinch 1994:99)—but sometimes the reptiles dodged their advances and defensively attacked. Since cats were precious to the ancient Egyptians, they came up with spells to heal them, many of which involved the same words as the spells for humans:

O Re [...] Come to Your daughter! The poison has entered her body and it has spread in her flesh. She has put her mouth to the ground, See, the poison has entered her body! Do come with Your power, and Your rage, with your wrath! See, it is concealed from You, now that it has entered the whole body of this cat under my fingers...20

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19 Spell 17 in the Book of the Dead shows the sacred cat of Ra killing Apophis with a knife in the Papyrus of Hunefer (presently located in the British Museum).
20 See Borghouts (1978:56).
Some of the spells called for the making of a wax cat figurine; the belief was that the right spell would transfer the venom into the sacred wax cat, who would be able to overcome it.

Interestingly, the gods associated with the thirty-seven types of serpents recognized in the *Brooklyn Papyrus* were not all evil ones destined to rain chaos and strife upon the world. Several of the fatal bites were from snakes that personified Ra, Selkis, and Sobek—deities of protection, while none of the personifications of Seth were deadly. This suggests that the gods did not simply deal with matters of good versus evil; they themselves may not have been simply one or the other. As supernatural beings, they cannot be judged by human standards. They are gods, but they are not exempt from their own duties and fates. Apophis is forever destined to battle Ra in the underworld in an attempt to throw the world into darkness, and Ra is fated to destroy him every night and rise again and bathe in the blood of his enemy.

### 4.4 Exorcisms

As mentioned above, the ancient Egyptians seem to have relied heavily upon the magical component of remedies to expel the venom from the afflicted person’s body. They believed that the venom itself was an evil entity which could only be expelled by magic. A portion of text in the *Brooklyn Papyrus* explicitly states that “if one recites an exorcism on him, he will live” (Sauneron 1989:187). This would explain why the external symptoms of the bite were treated with medicine and the internal demons (read: venom) were dealt with magically (Golding 2013:151). The Egyptians, however, did also understand lost causes as they were able to recognize when exorcisms would not work. Spell 16 states: “[A]s for the gany-snake, it’s totally inky-black; its stomach…its head is small; its snout is large. If it bites someone, he dies immediately. Its bite is
like that of Apophis. It is a manifestation of Sobek. It’s useless to try to use spells against it ever” (Sauneron 1989:10).

**4.5 Priests, Magicians, and Physicians**

The presence of the snake, whether real or fictitious, was such a real factor in the lives of the ancient Egyptians that protection from these creatures and treatment of their bites merited persons with specialized training.

Since magic and medicine were often coupled when dangerous enemies were involved, one can assume that the ancient Egyptian magician and doctor were also closely allied. A few relevant terms include *hk’w*, often translated as ‘magician’; *s’w*, ‘protector’; and *w’b sḥmt*, ‘priest of Sekhmet’ (Borghouts 1995:1784). These terms were sometimes used in conjunction with *swnw*, ‘doctor’. According to Nunn (1996:120), the *swnw* often had a title that indicated a professional magician status. The doctor was trained in the use of healing and protective amulets, as well as incantations and rituals dedicated to healing. A specific type of priest-doctor was known as the “Controller of Selqet”, the goddess of scorpions and occasionally snakes, and they specifically dealt with these venomous reptiles through a series of rituals and amulets which harnessed the evil force’s magic and used it against them (Golding 2013:33).

Sometimes the priest-doctor would accompany mining expeditions for turquoise in areas overflowing with these dangerous creatures to provide physical protection and psychological reassurance (Ritner 2001:195). Pieces of ostraca found at Deir el Medina provide accounts of workers being bitten by scorpions (“The scorpion has bitten him—sick” (*psh sw t₃ wḥ’t mr*)), and

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21 Sekhmet was the fiercest warrior goddess in the ancient Egyptian world. She was depicted as a lion with a solar disk and *uraeus* placed atop her head.
consequently being absent from work (Collier 2016:106–107). In the event that someone was injected with venom, the healer would use both conventional medicine and invoke Serket to treat the wounds.

4.6 Restorative Deities

4.6.1 Selqet (Serket, Serqet, Selket)

After the Old Kingdom, scorpions started to be sculpted onto talismans and round sculptures as a protective element. This was also when the scorpion goddess, Serket, began to gain popularity as protector against venomous wounds inflicted by snakes and scorpions (PT 1375). Note that the word for scorpion was also feminine. In the late Old Kingdom the noun was pronounced $drt$, and in the late Middle Kingdom $wht$; the plural form $d\text{rw}$ is found in New Kingdom medical papyri. The form $ddbt$ was also used in magical papyri—the only texts to use the scorpion hieroglyph—as part of formulae to repel scorpions, conjure away venom, and cure stings ($rd[w] n \text{ sn}t d\text{rt}$) (von Känel 2001:186). Other scorpion glyphs were found in the Coffin Texts as the determinative of the goddess $Hddt$ (associated with Serket) at the Edfu temple.

When artists drew pictures of goddesses associated with the scorpion on walls and carved them on tombs, they did notice body segmentation and the number of legs, evidenced by additions of legs to promote fear. The artists also sometimes drew the pedipalps capped by fingers to illustrate their prey-catching capabilities, and the stinger is usually present (El-Hennawy 2011:11).

Scorpion deities were mostly seen in syncretism. Examples of this include $Hddt$, one of Serket’s cult centers at the Edfu temple, Isis-$Hddt$, the scorpion goddess of Edfu, and Isis ($wh’t$),
shown as a scorpion with a human head. Isis-Serket (srq.(jt) or a fuller form srq.(jt)-Ht.w) was depicted with two ostrich feathers flanking a scorpion at the temple of Seti I at Abydos, and another goddess with a scorpion on her head, or with her head replaced by a scorpion, is depicted on the Horus-on-the-Crocodile stela (von Känel 2001:187). Selket was associated with Isis, shown in variations of her persona by wearing a solar disk between horns. The scorpion glyph was seen in determinatives of goddesses as well. The name of the goddess Selket was written ⲥ̣ ⲥ ⲡ ⲛ ⲟ ⲟ ⲥ and transliterated as srq.t, and Isis, being associated with Serket and scorpions, had an epithet Hededet, which was written ⲥ ⲥ ⲥ ⲡ ⲛ ⲟ ⲟ ⲥ. 

By the Middle Kingdom, in addition to her ability to heal the afflicted, Serqet was also considered a protector of the dead because of her association with creatures that could take life. She was associated with venoms that caused breathlessness and stiffening in particular, as scorpion venom “stiffens” the throat and closes it, rendering the victim without oxygen (Pryke 2016, The Scorpion and the Goddess section, para. 3). Serqet was also said to be the protector of embalmer tents and canopic jars (especially the intestinal jar that was associated with venom), and in the afterlife gave breath to the worthy dead so that they could be reborn into the next life (Zucconi 2007:34-35).

4.6.2 Meretseger

Meretseger was a famous cobra-goddess who lived on a mountain peak above the Valley of the Kings in western Thebes. She was revered as the “Peak of the West”, thought to be a snake-infested pyramid-shaped desert mountain that served as an entrance to
the *Duat* (Tyldesley 2010:216). Her name means ‘she who loves silence’, appropriate for a goddess who dwelled in the secluded region looking after the dead (Berger 2007:95).

Meretseger was usually depicted as a coiled cobra (Fig. 11), a snake-headed woman, or a cobra with a woman’s head, though on occasion she was shown as female-headed scorpion. The snake and the scorpion were two of the few creatures that inhabited her desolate region and were thus seen as fitting symbols for the goddess.

She was worshipped primarily by the necropolis workers in Deir el-Medina or in huts in the Valley of the Kings during the New Kingdom (Fig. 12). The workmen dedicated stelae to her as a dangerous but merciful goddess, often referring to her as the ‘Peak of the West’ as a mark of respect (Hart 2005:91-92). The goddess struck down workers who committed crimes or made false promises with punishments such as blindness or venomous stings and bites, but several stelae record instances of Meretseger’s forgiveness and the subsequent recovery of the workmen—provided she was convinced of their remorse (Lesko 1999:77). The draftsman Neferabu dedicated a stela to Meretseger, depicted as a serpent with one human head and two serpent heads, and he engraved a hymn that salutes her while declaring her power to punish as well as forgive the truly penitent:

> An ignorant man (I was), without my heart, who did not know good from evil.  
> I was doing misdeeds against the Peak and she taught me a lesson.  
> I was in her hand night and day, sitting on bricks like the pregnant woman…  
> Behold I will say to the great and small  
> Who are in the (artisan) crew,  
> Beware of the Peak!  
> Because a lion is within it!  
> The Peak strikes with the stroke of a savage lion

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22 A carving of Meretseger is on the sarcophagus lid of Ramesses III (Dyn. XX) and can be found at the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge. <http://webapps.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/explorer/index.php?oid=49037>. 


She is after him who offends her.  

### 4.7 Healing Amulets

#### 4.7.1 Wedjat-eye

Amulets of Wadjet in various forms, especially the Eye, became quite common in the Third Intermediate Period (1070-664 BC). The symbol of the *wedjat-eye* arose as a result of the famous battle between Horus and Seth over Osiris’ legacy during which Set ripped out the left eye of Horus and Horus tore off Set’s genitalia. With the help of the other gods, Thoth restored Horus’ eye (the *wadjet*) and its subsequent use in the regeneration of Osiris led to its symbolism of healing, restoration, and protection (CT 335). *Wedjat-eye* amulets thus embodied those same apotropaic powers. The *wedjat-eye* from the Metropolitan Museum of Art is particularly interesting for its combination of the regular *wedjat-eye* with a (presumably vulture) wing, two *uraei*, and a lion (Fig. 13).

#### 4.7.2 Cippi

The ancient Egyptians created tablets inscribed with magical healing spells for snake bites that often invoked deities to give the incantations some sort of power over these creatures, as well as to authenticate the stories. According to Seele (1947:43), the primary function of the *cippus*, as it was called, was to provide magical healing for scorpion stings or the bite of venomous snakes by means of the anti-venom inscriptions that covered the tablets’ surfaces.

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23 The stela is part of a collection at the Turin museum marked number 102. More information about the stela can be found here: [http://www.deirelmedina.com/lenka/Meretseger.html](http://www.deirelmedina.com/lenka/Meretseger.html).
It was common for the sufferer to be compared to the young Horus, who was saved by the quick and clever actions of his mother, Isis (Borghouts 1995:1781). The god Ra had a secret name which he refused to reveal to Isis, as it would mean passing on his power. Isis used magic to create a venomous snake that would bite Ra to facilitate a trade: his name for his life. As Ra suffered, he realized that only Isis could cure him; eventually he could no longer take the pain and relented and told her his secret name in exchange for a healing spell. As names had great power and significance in the ancient Egyptian world, words themselves could be used as amulets or a powerful protective source.

The tale of Horus’ healing from scorpion stings and snakebites in the marshes was the basis for *cippi* like the one in the collection of the Royal Collection Trust (Fig. 14). With proper recitations, a liquid poured over the stela by its owner, a priest, or a physician would be imbued with the power of the engraved spells and images. Those who sought a remedy or protection against snakes and their bites would either drink this liquid or pour it over themselves (BM).

### 4.8 Rejuvenation

Alongside healing, another positive perception of the serpent relates to rejuvenation and rebirth. The reptile periodically sheds its skin, thereby associating itself with the renewal of life. Some interpretations of the Ouroboros suggest that the never-ending loop created by the serpent eating its tail is symbolic of perpetuity and immortality. The snake is a common symbol of death and rebirth (Henderson and Oakes 1990:36), and in the Twelfth Hour of *The Book of Am-Tuat*, Ra

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Argyros

rejuvenates in a snake’s belly: “His gods draw him along by a cord, and he entereth into his tail and cometh forth from his mouth, and cometh to the birth under the form of Khepera” (Budge 1905:259). Observation of the snake’s ability to shed its skin to reveal a new exterior has promoted its symbolism as one of rejuvenation and the renewal of health.

4.9 Conclusion

The treatment of snake bites occurred on both the physical and psychological levels. The ancient Egyptians used natural animal, vegetable, and mineral ingredients—including actual snake parts—to treat venomous wounds and deter inimical spirits. Perhaps by consuming snake parts the Egyptians believed that the gods would see evil within the afflicted and cure them, or that the wounded person would take on some of the rejuvenating characteristics of the snake.

The Brooklyn Papyrus provides significant information on the kinds of methods and recipes used to tend snakebites, indicating that the prevalence of their bites was serious and required the presence of priest-healers. These practitioners also employed amulets and incantations to treat the magical sources of the bites, frequently pairing these practices with the recitation of mythology as a prophylactic measure. Meretseger, Selqet, and Isis were most commonly invoked to heal venomous wounds. The serpent could both cause sickness and play a part in the curative rituals on the physical and spiritual planes.
V. The Protective Serpent

5.0 Introduction

As previously discussed, snakes were a very real problem faced by the ancient Egyptians. The dangerous power of these creatures could be controlled via magic and used to protect the individual or deity from negative entities. Many serpent deities were entreated for protection.

The Egyptians employed a variety of methods for protection against snakes. While mythological demon-snakes (e.g. Apophis) were certainly of concern to these ancient people, live snakes provided a more consistent threat to the living and the deceased. Most protective measures were created and used to prevent injury from these live snakes, often relying upon the aid of serpent deities to do so.

Apotropaic magic was used as a preventative measure against harm that came from physical or supernatural sources, or was invoked to keep hostile forces from penetrating households and temples. This section examines the protective role of the serpent, and surveys the prophylactic tools used against this creature.

5.1 Protective Serpent Deities

The ancient Egyptians believed in opposites to maintain balance in the universe—light versus dark, order versus chaos, good versus evil. The gods embodied these roles and paired off according to their functions, destined to engage in an eternity of battles mediated by Thoth, who saw to it that one side would never truly overcome the other. The ancient Egyptians believed that the battles among the gods reflected their own earthly situations, so that the pharaoh’s
defeat of an enemy indicated the victory of *maʿat* or the emergence of civil unrest and anarchy meant that chaos had won.

5.1.1 Mehen

As serpents were both feared and revered during this time, so too serpent deities possessed traits that were used both to help and to harm. One of the more prominent serpent deities in Egyptian underworld mythology went by the name of Mehen, “the coiled one”. In the *Book of Gates*, he envelopes Ra in his coils and protects him on his nightly voyage through the *Amduat* (Figs. 15 and 16).

The *Coffin Texts* (758-760) describe this god as having nine spherical rings which constantly circle and protect the sun god. According to Piccione (1990:46), the ‘serpent board game’ was inspired by this description of Mehen. The coiled serpent was also referred to in the various guidebooks of the underworld (e.g. the *Book of the Dead*) where he uses his many coils to wrap himself in a dome around the shrine-like cabin above Ra, protecting him from the evil that surrounds them (Barker 2014:147; Rothöhler 1999:12–19).

5.1.2 Nehebkau

Another underworld serpent deity was Nehebkau, “He who unites the Kas”. First attested in the Pyramid Texts, he was regarded as a protective deity who looked after the pharaoh and the Egyptians in the afterlife. He was said to be the son of the earth god, Geb, and the serpent harvest goddess, Renenutet: “H3 Wsjr N pn, twt Nḥb-k3.w, s3 Gb, ms(w)~n mw.t=f Rnnwt.t. O Osiris N,

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you are Nehebkau, son of Geb, born of your mother Renenutet” (CT 762). Other records state that Nehebkau was the son of the scorpion goddess, Serqet. He is also said to have swallowed seven cobras to consume their heka and gain magical power (CT 85). Due to his association with serpents, priests sometimes invoked him in magical spells for protection against and curing of snakebites.

Nehebkau’s glyph was technically a variation of two hands in prayer, but it also resembled a two-headed snake. Thus, he was often represented either as a man with a serpent’s head and tail (Figs. 17 and 18), or as a snake with two heads (Fig. 19). As the guardian to the entrance of the Duat, the two-headed snake god certainly would have served his purpose as a fierce protector of the dead (Wilkinson 2003:223).

5.1.3 Renenutet

Literally the ‘snake who nourishes’, Renenutet was revered as a benevolent deity. She was a goddess of the harvest and a divine mother, and was therefore awarded a protective and nurturing role in nature. In the Old Kingdom, she was venerated as a guardian of the king in life and in the afterlife, coalescing with Wadjet to symbolize the royal uraeus (PT 302), and representing the magical power inherent in the linen robe worn by the king, of which even the gods are fearful (PT 1755; 1794). Because of this, she was also linked to mummy bandages, offering them to the dead (Fig. 20). In Ptolemaic times, she was called "Lady of the Robes" due to her association with clothing: “O Osiris the King, I have clad you in the Eye of Horus, this Renenutet-garment of which the gods are afraid, so that the gods may fear you just as they fear the Eye of Horus” (PT 622).
Renenutet’s attributes as a goddess of fecundity and harvest is conveyed by her epithets ‘lady of the fertile land’, ‘mistress of the threshing floor’ and ‘lady of the granaries’, as snakes were often seen in the fields around harvest time hunting the rodents who would threaten the crops (Wilkinson 2003:224). The yearly flood of the Nile also brought a rise in the number of snakes by Nile settlements because of the increase of pests that scampered out of the ground. This is why snakes came to be associated with the fruitfulness of the river.

The goddess also held important familial roles as a provider and a nourisher of infants (Broekhuis 1971:150). The Egyptians’ choice to assign this role to serpents is an odd one. Suckling is a defining feature of mammals, for only mammals have the ability to produce milk. Evans (2013:49) proposes that Renenutet was manifested as a spitting cobra, and that these reptiles were chosen as a symbol of abundance because they eject fluid similar to the spouting of milk from the teats of cows and humans.

The interrelationships of the goddess with other deities were extensive. During the Ptolemaic period in the Fayyum, a region associated with immense fertility, Renenutet was assimilated to Isis, a process made easier by their shared association with Osiris and the iconography of a nursing mother (Leibovitch 1953:77). As a grain goddess, Renenutet was identified as the mother of Osiris in the form of the child Nepri, god of grain, and in the Book of the Dead Renenutet had an affair with Atum and gave birth to Horus, who was famously the son of Isis. Her associations with children also identified her with Meskhenet as a nurturer and with Hathor whose headdress she wore.

The goddess was mentioned by name in the Old Kingdom Pyramid Texts, but was not portrayed iconographically until the Middle Kingdom. From that point until the Late Period, she
was usually depicted as an erect cobra with a sun disk and horns atop its head, often with two
tall plumes surmounting the solar disk. The goddess was also occasionally depicted
anthropomorphically as a beautiful woman or a woman with a snake's head, standing or
enthroned and sometimes holding or nursing a child, usually Nepri (Fig. 21) (Wilkinson 2003:224).

During the New Kingdom, Renenutet is heavily represented in agricultural scenes on the wall
paintings and reliefs on the tombs of Theban nobles (Marini 2015:74). She is also depicted in the
tombs of kings and royal scribes (see Figs. 22-24).

Renenutet was most widely revered as a goddess of fecundity and was most popular
among agricultural workers who were usually not included in temple ceremonies. Festivals
devoted to the goddess were held in the last month of the winter-spring season (called Peret)
when all the seeds had been planted, and in the first month of the spring-summer season
(Shemu) when the harvest began to mature (Hart 2005:136). Even as a manifestation of a cobra,
she was viewed by farmers and housewives as a beautiful goddess. Vessels decorated with cobras
commonly found in ancient Egyptian households likely represented Renenutet, the Mistress of
Provisions (López-Grande 2016:179). She was worshipped all around Egypt from the Middle
Kingdom onward from the Delta region and her cult in the city of Dja to Giza, Abydos, and Thebes.
There is also evidence of shrines erected to honor her in cultivated fields and vineyards, and
during the harvest and the pressing of grapes offerings were made to her (Marini 2015:75). The
ancient Egyptians’ affection for this goddess is clear. As an idolized deity, Renenutet became
Thermouthis in the Graeco-Roman period of Egypt. She may have even survived the pagan era,
acting as the underlying concept for the Christian saint, Thermuthis (Monaghan 2014:22; Witt 1972:95).26

5.1.5 Wadjet

The cobra goddess Wadjet, known to the Greeks as Buto, was associated with the Nile Delta region and became the tutelary deity of Lower Egypt while her counterpart Nekhbet, the vulture goddess, protected Upper Egypt. Wadjet means ‘the green one’, referring to the serpent’s color and to the Delta’s papyrus swamps which she inhabited. Although ancient Egypt had been united since 3000 BC, an underlying division existed between the lands. The pharaoh was divinely protected by the ‘Two Ladies’ of Upper and Lower Egypt that had been taken as national symbols by Predynastic rulers before the unification (Hart 2005:126). Hence, one of the royal titles means ‘the Two Mistresses’, emphasizing that the pharaoh was being defended by the two goddesses.

Wadjet was also commonly associated with the protective uraeus worn on the royal headdress or crown of the pharaoh; it also served the purpose of declaring that the wearer had dominion over the whole land. As the uraeus she could spit fire at the enemies of the king, and inscriptions describe these actions in war, e.g. Thutmose III at the battle of Megiddo and Ramesses II at Kadesh27 (Janzen 2013:253–254). The sun-disk of Ra was also usually depicted with a cobra coiled around it as a symbol of his kingship, a practice which led to the cobra being

26 One of the few mentions of Thermuthis is by Josephus, a 1st century AD Romano-Jewish historian and scholar, Josephus, Flavius, and Siwart Haerkamp. Complete works of Josephus; Antiquities of the Jews, The Wars of the Jews, Against Apion, etc. etc. (New York: Bigelow, Brown, 1900), here ch.9, para. 5–7.

thought of as the ‘Eye of Ra’ which could expel fire against his enemies (Watterson 2003, Wadjet section, para. 4). In the legend of the upbringing of young Horus in the swamps of Khemmis, Wadjet acts as his nurse and guardian. This led to a later identification with Isis, as she was usually the one who functioned as Horus’ protector.

In Predynastic times, the cobra goddess was worshipped in the ancient towns of Pe and Dep, home of the legendary early kings of Egypt in the northwestern Delta region. The towns were renamed Per-Wadjet or “the house of Wadjet” in the New Kingdom, rendered by the Greeks as Buto and known today as Tell el-Fara’un (Pinch 2004:211). Due to her association with the region and the early kings, Wadjet became the tutelary goddess of Lower Egypt.

She was most often depicted as an erect hooded cobra poised for attack, and it is in this form that the goddess is represented as the uraeus which protected both king and gods. The amulet was often shown attached to the solar disk (Figs. 25 and 26)—even during the Amarna Period when the depiction of most non-solar deities was avoided or prohibited (Hart 2005:161).

The raised serpent was often shown seated along with the vulture Nekhbet on two baskets, an iconography known from the First Dynasty. She appeared as a snake in the royal titulary at the beginning of Dynasty I, and was worn on the king’s forehead by the middle of that dynasty. She was not represented anthropomorphically before the middle of Dynasty V (Trigger 1992:150). From this time onwards, representations of Wadjet and Nekhbet in human form, wearing the respective crowns of their regions, were shown in the king’s coronation scenes. At

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his accession, each king was given the title ‘He of the Two Ladies’, which, combined with the royal uraeus, indicated his divine protection and rulership over the kingdom.

Because of the connection between the Two Ladies, some of their iconographic features merged. Wadjet was sometimes shown as a vulture or as a serpent with wings, and a cobra wearing the White Crown usually represented Nekhbet. Wilkinson (2003:226) believes that it is possible that some depictions and amulets in the form of papyrus scepters or columns, especially when surmounted by a cobra, are also meant to represent the goddess due to the similarity of her name to the Egyptian word for papyrus. The goddess later became identified with Bastet, the war goddess of Lower Egypt, who was another emblem of the nation. Bastet was most commonly associated with cats, though in her aforementioned role as war goddess, she took on the shape of a lioness. As such, Wadjet was known to occasionally appear in leonine form as a fiercely protective ‘Eye of Ra’ (Wilkinson 2003:226) (see 5.3.3).

5.2 Protection in the Underworld

5.2.1 The Book of Gates

Several examples of protective serpent iconography exist in the Book of Gates. The Duat was divided into twelve hours of the night. According to Budge (1969:179) Ra’s boat begins its journey through the underworld in the First Hour. The sun god appears as a scarab beetle on a disc surrounded by the Ouroboros, likely there as a cyclical symbol of nature—death from life, and a cycle of rebirth and renewal.
In Hour Four, Ra and his entourage come upon Hereret, begetter of evil serpents and an enemy of Ra (Pippy 2011:448). He turns to the twelve goddesses, representatives of the twelve hours of the underworld, and says:

“Harken, you goddesses of the Hours. The appeals are addressed to you—act for yourselves among you. [...] Stop you the serpent Hereret! Live you by what comes out of him! Your portions are in the Netherworld, you swallow what Hereret gives birth to, you annihilate what comes out of him” (Piankoff 1954, qtd. in Pippy).

Several uraei appear in the Fourth, Fifth, Eighth, Ninth Hours to spit fire at the enemies of Ra. The Eighth Hour also reveals the presence of the fire-breathing serpent, Kheti (Budge 1969:193). The Ninth Hour shows a serpent boat capped by a snake–head bearing a royal crown (Budge 1969:195).

The Tenth Hour is densely populated with underworld serpents in the form of uraei. Approximately twenty-two of these protective cobras decorate the entrance gates and boats (Budge 1969:196-198).

In the Eleventh Hour, a serpent ‘boomerang’ is used as a weapon by throwing it at the enemy (Budge 1972:365). As serpent wands were shaped like boomerangs and were used for their protective elements, I believe that this underworld boomerang may have been one of these curved serpent wands.

The Twelfth Hour illustrates Ra’s boat being pulled by underworld-dwellers through the body of a huge serpent. According to this text, Ra enters through the tail of the snake in his form of the iwfc-Rc, "Flesh of Ra," and he exits via the mouth in the form of Khepri, the scarab beetle and sun god (Budge 1905:304-305).

5.2.2 Serpent Boats

In ancient Egyptian underworld imagery the serpent was used in a protective capacity by either forming a boat in which the deity could travel, or by acting as part of a boat. As Ra navigates parts of the underworld he is shielded in his barge and the serpent Mehen surrounds him on his vessel, thereby ensuring extra protection from the evil serpent Apophis. This serpent imagery incorporates the use of sympathetic magic in order to repel the serpent demon.

Fig. 29: Underworld serpent boat, the boat of Nepr.31

The illustration above depicts the fourth and last of the protective boats that preceded Ra’s barque on his treacherous journey through the Second Hour of the night. This boat has uraei at

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the bow and stern, and in the center kneels a woman with no arms, with two armless women standing on her either side. According to Budge (1969:210), this boat belongs to Nepr, god of grain and vegetation.

The next illustration comes from the Fourth Hour of the night. Here Ra must switch boats and journey on a serpent’s body through the Fourth Hour. The region in which the sun god travels is so dark that his own radiance cannot penetrate it. The serpent, however, lights the way with its fiery breath (Budge 1969:217). Several serpents pass by Ra on his voyage, a few of which Budge names and/or describes:

The first, called Hetch-nau, lies at full length in a boat, each end of which terminates in a human head, and is the guardian of Seker; the second is three-headed, and he moves over the ground on four human legs and feet; the third is called Amen; the fourth is Hekent, and has a human head growing out of its body just above the tail; and the fifth is Menmenu, which has three heads, and bears on its back fourteen stars and fourteen human heads surmounted by disks (218–220).

He goes on to describe three more serpents: a huge uraeus, another snake with wings, and finally the deity Nehebkau. Not all of these can be categorized strictly as positive or negative figures. Many simply resided in the underworld and traversed the riverbanks in search of food, indicating how the ancient Egyptians thought about these creatures that surrounded them in their daily lives.

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5.3 Protective Amulets

The value of ancient Egyptian protective charms went beyond the symbolism of what they depicted — their powers needed to be ‘activated’ by magical rituals. Once ‘activated’, an amulet would be worn to ensure that its owner continued to benefit from the magic that it now embodied. Professional magicians known as *saus*, sometimes translated as ‘amulet men’, were practitioners of medicine—again because magic and medicine were closely intertwined in the ancient Egyptian belief system (see 4.2)—but were primarily makers of amulets (Pinch 1994:56). They also used spoken or written charms for the protection of those who employed them. They often accompanied miners on their expeditions to Sinai, a desert region overrun with dangerous reptiles. Many of these recitations often referred to mythology, associating the person for whom the amulet was intended with gods who had power over inimical forces or who were said to have been healed of injury (e.g. Horus). Burial amulets were most often wrapped in the deceased’s mummy bandages, and helped them make the dangerous journey into the afterlife safely (JHAM). The protective properties of amulets served the dead in the same manner as the living, fulfilling a variety of ancient Egyptian needs for well-being and safety.

5.3.1 Nehebkau amulets

Nehebkau was an Egyptian serpent deity whose image and invocation in texts was utilized to prevent snakes from entering homes (Mundkur 1983:64). In serpent form he was thought to have some power over snakebites and, to a certain degree, other venomous bites, such as those of scorpions, thus being associated with Selket in some texts. According to Mundkur, choosing Nehebkhau may have been because his origins were essentially sinister, and drawing on a god with
dangerous qualities allowed the user to have influence over that entity, otherwise known as sympathetic magic (Frazer 1894, Ch. 3, Sec. 2). The Nehebkau amulets were first found in burial contexts relating to the Third Intermediate Period (Andrews 1994:26).

![Amulet of Nehebkau, Third Intermediate Period. Museum of Fine Arts.](image)

5.3.2 Snake-head amulets

Amulets depicting a serpent-head or forepart were intended to protect the wearer from snake bites (Petrie 1914:25–26). These charms were commonly made from semiprecious stones, ivory, gold, and glass, and were often glazed and even inscribed. Many snake-head amulets were made of red carnelian stone as it symbolized dynamism and power\(^{33}\) (Fig. 32), while gold was used to attain immortality because of its sun-like radiance and resistance to oxidization (El-Shahawy and

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\(^{33}\) More examples of carnelian serpent-head amulets can be found in Reisner, George A. *Amulets*, Vol. 1 (Le Caire: Impr. de l'Institut français d'archéologie orientale, 1907), pp. 32-39.
A gold cobra (Fig. 33) and a carnelian snake head amulet were among the 143 phylactic objects removed from Tutankhamun’s mummy wrappings (Brier 2001:194).

5.3.3 The Uraeus

The Egyptian uraeus is a major example of a protective serpent symbol that appears in numerous amulet forms, from texts to jewelry to architectural decoration. Fear of the cobra turned it into the ideal symbol of power for the Egyptian pharaohs who wanted their enemies to fear them as they feared the serpent (Fig. 34). Egyptian amulets incorporating the sun disc and uraeus served as protection and represented the sun god Ra (Fig. 35) (Petrie 1914:25).

According to mythology, Atum-Ra took his divine eye from his forehead to search for his missing children, Shu and Tefnut. The eye lit up the darkness of the Nun, and the deities found their way back to their father along with the ‘Eye Goddess’. In the meantime, Atum-Ra had grown another eye, and once the ‘Eye Goddess’ discovered this, she was furious. To appease her, he placed her on his brow in the form of a cobra to spit fire at his enemies (Pinch 1994:24). In many of the stories Wadjet assumed the role of the ‘Eye Goddess’ and then became the ‘Eye of Ra’. Though different from the wedjat-eye amulet, which is derived from the ‘Eye of Horus’, the ‘Eye of Ra’ symbol also became a popular amulet because it represented many of the same concepts as its counterpart.

The Two Ladies were most commonly associated with the royal uraeus, indited by the title ‘He of the Two Ladies’ that each king took upon their ascension to the throne. Certain pharaohs even commissioned the construction of uraeus friezes to depict their throne names34.

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34 Sankiewicz, Marta. "Cryptogram Uraeus Frieze in the Hatshepsut Temple at Deir el-Bahari." *Centre D’Archaeologie Mediterraneenne de L’Academie Polonaise des Sciences* (Etudes et Travaux XXII,
The symbol was so widely venerated that when Akhenaten promulgated the worship of Aten and essentially created a monotheistic hierarchy, he kept the sun disk adorned with the royal *uraeus* (see 5.1.5).

### 5.3.4 Lion amulets

Felines were celebrated as serpent killers due to their fiercely protective nature. Both Sekhmet and Bastet exemplify this. We know that the cat goddess occasionally appeared in leonine form in her role as the goddess of war, so the use of lion amulets for preventative measures against snakebites is plausible (Pinch 1994:118). Many amulets were believed to be needed on the person in order for the imbued magic to be effective, so holes were added for small strips of linen to be looped through so that the charms could be worn around the wrist or neck.

### 5.3.5 Bes Amulets

Bes, protector of households, mothers, children, and childbirth, was depicted quite differently from other Egyptian deities. He was an exceptionally ugly dwarf god with leonine features, shown in profile, ithyphallic, and wearing a plumed headdress to scare demons away from households. As a household deity, it became his responsibility to protect the home from snakes and evil spirits (Allen 2006:10). As he was especially protective of mothers and children, amulets of Bes were commonly worn for birth rituals and placed around the house for protection against hostile forces (Figs. 36 and 37). Images of him were placed above the entrances to rooms where people slept. During the Middle Kingdom he was especially seen as a protector of children from

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2008). Additional evidence in the mortuary complex of King Djoser (ca. 2680 BC), the southern wall at the Temple of Luxor, and in Tutankhamun’s tomb.
dangerous creatures (Golding 2013:228). Egyptian headrests of the second millennium BC sometimes had images of Bes clutching snakes and swords or spears (Fig. 38). These images were intended to protect the sleeper from various dangers in the night, especially, it seems, from snakes (Pinch 1994:43).

5.3.6 Cippi

From the thirteenth century BC to the second century AD, the Egyptians also constructed amuletic stelae with images of a young, naked Horus trampling on one or more crocodiles and gripping snakes, scorpions, and sometimes lions and antelopes as a form of protection from snakebites and scorpion stings (Ritner 2001:197). Egyptians placed cippi in their houses and gardens and even buried them in the ground to protect themselves and their property from dangerous creatures (BAAM). Miniature, portable cippi contained similar spells and were quite popular during the Late Period (Fig. 39).

The Metternich Stela, also known as the Horus Stele or the Cippus of Horus (Fig. 40), was commissioned during the reign of Nectanebo II (360-343 BC) and has incantations carved into the stone calling for Horus to protect the pharaoh from any dangerous animals, including both land and aquatic snakes:

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sbA sn.k xnty xm
r irt sA.k
r wHm mkt.k
r xtm r n Ddft nb imyw pt imyw tA imyw mw
r sanx rmT
r sHtp nTrw
r sAxt ra m snsw.k
mai n.i As hrw pn
mi ir.n.k Xn n dpt
xsf.k n.i mAiw nb Hr mrt
msHw nb Hr itrw
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...to seal the mouth of every serpent of those in the sky, those on the land, those in the water, to make people live, to make the gods content, to transfigure Ra in your glorifications. Come to me quickly today as you have made a boat sailing. Repel for me every lion on the desert slope every crocodile on the river, every biting mouth in their cavern Do it for me like the stone of the desert mountain, like the sherd edge in the street. remove for me the poison of the bite which is in every limb of the patient so that your words are not rejected on account of it. See, your name is called today. May you create the raising of your renown, when you have lifted by your words of light. May you cause the sufferer to live for me, so that adoration is given to you by the populace. The two goddesses Right are adored in your forms, all gods are called in your likeness, see, your name is called today. I am Horus the saviors.35

A critical piece of the incantations was that the patient needed to be identified with a god and usually with Horus, and so cause the evil entities to reconsider the seriousness of their offenses (Nunn 1996:108). The Metternich incantation employs this technique, and even ends with the speaker (either Nectanebo or a magician speaking on behalf of him) taking Horus’ name in the first person and ‘becoming’ him to ensure extra protection. The magical power of the texts was

35 University College London’s transliteration and corresponding translation of the right side of the Horus stele (http://www.ucl.ac.uk/museums-static/digitalegypt/art/horusstelae.html).
transferred by pouring water over the inscriptions and collecting it in a bowl, which a person would then drink in order to “fill his body with heka” and thereby heal the afflicted person. The miniature amulets could also transfer their power by being kissed or rubbed, which would explain the surface wear (JHAM).

The stela also gave recommendations on how to travel safely. The traveler would have assumed the identity of a divinity, and the snake would have been so impressed with fear that it would not have bitten the wanderer. Of course, the rover would have had to utilize an appropriate spell to ensure safe passage:

If the Backward-faced comes against Osiris while he is on the water,  
the eye of Horus is on him to capsize you, placed on your backs.  
O you who are in the water, your mouths are sealed by Ra,  
your gullets are blocked by Sekhmet,  
your tongues are cut off by Thoth,  
your eyes are blinded by Heka,  
those four great gods who make the protection of Osiris,  
they are the ones who make the protection of the one who is on the water,  
all people, all animals who are on the water today - protection.

5.3.7 An Egyptian medicinal charm

A protective medicinal charm mentioned by Pinch (2006:82) consists of garlic ground up in beer, which was then poured throughout the house or tomb at night to repel snakes, scorpions, and ghosts. Garlic’s pungent odor was thought to deter supernatural entities. The Egyptian word for garlic supposedly sounded like the word for harm, and the fact that individual cloves of garlic were thought to resemble teeth only strengthened the belief in garlic as a sound supernatural repellent.
5.4 Serpent Wands and Staffs

The ancient Egyptians believed that magicians held great power and control over serpents, and that this power extended to their tools. One of the most famous depictions of a serpent rod or staff is in the contest between Aaron and the Pharaoh’s magicians in Exodus 7:8-13. Aaron’s god commands him to throw his staff upon the ground, where it is then transformed into a serpent. The magicians do the same and their staffs also become serpents and the two sides begin their battle. Aaron’s serpent rod ultimately swallows the other serpents whole, proving his god’s dominance and declaring his victory\(^{36}\).

Aaron’s rod is also used to turn pools of water into blood and manipulate the river Nile, which makes sense as snakes were associated with water in ancient Egypt. Evidently the serpent staff operated as a magical tool with which the magician could perform his deeds.

Several iconographic representations of people and gods holding serpent staffs appear throughout ancient Egyptian history as well (Figs. 41 and 42). In the temple of Seti I at Abydos, Thoth, a mediator god and the god of writing, holds two staffs intertwined with serpents that wear the crowns of Upper and Lower Egypt (Fig. 43). Several coffins also illustrate the god Heka wielding a serpent staff in each hand\(^{37}\), proving that protection from serpents was practiced in life and death.

\(^{36}\) In ancient Egypt, swallowing was viewed as a performative act that either destroyed the thing swallowed or to acquire its power and knowledge (Noegel 2017). Spell 273 in the *Pyramid Texts* states that “‘[King] Unas is one who eats men and lives on the gods... Unas eats their *heka*, swallows their spirits’”. Here, Unas consumes their *heka*, or magical essence, to gain their power.

\(^{37}\) Detail from the coffin of Neb-Taui at The Metropolitan Museum of Art (ca. 1000 BC). For a drawing, see Piankoff and Rambova 1957:59.
Priests believed that *heka* could protect them from poisonous snakes and other natural dangers, as spell 885 in the *Coffin Texts* makes clear: “The serpent is in my hand and cannot bite me”. The Metternich Stela depicts Horus standing on a pair of crocodiles while grasping a serpent in each hand along with two scorpions, a lion, and an antelope—all animals that were either extremely dangerous or were associated with Seth (Fig. 44). As words and images held great power to the ancient Egyptians, the stele would have bestowed upon its owner protection from snake bites and other dangerous creatures.

Serpentine wands and staffs had a long history in ancient Egyptian religious culture. One notable example is a vignette from the funerary composition ‘Anubis and the Seven Demons’. The papyrus depicts one serpent wand grasped as a cane by an underworld spirit while another is waved by the magician before a mumiform figure (Niwinski 1989, qtd. in Ritner 2006:205). A more common link between the staff and snake is found in the *was* or *d’m*-scepter (Fig. 45), formal staff of divine authority, which may be presented in a serpentine form (Ritner 2006:205). Interestingly, Set wielded this weapon’s powers of controlling nature (e.g. storms, lightning, floods, wind, etc.) to destroy and overcome his enemies. However, the *was*-scepter was also a symbol of order and balance, meaning that the holder decided the scepter’s purpose (Ford 2013:100).

James Quibell discovered a magician’s tomb while excavating the Ramesseum at Thebes in the late 1800s (Quibell 1898:3; Shaw 2012:51). The tomb contained a wooden box of medicomagical papyri, hymns and texts, a bronze snake wand (Fig. 46), and a female figurine wearing a Bastet mask gripping a snake in each hand (Fig. 47). A similar bronze serpent was found inside
the early 18th-Dynasty coffin of Montuhotep, which may suggest that such objects were placed in burials to protect the inhabitant’s body. In 2002, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston acquired a pair of bronze double-headed serpent wands which roughly date to the Thirteenth Dynasty (Fig. 48). Lesser known examples of serpent wands include one excavated by Howard Carter within a group tomb (no. 37) of the Birabi section of western Thebes. The bronze staff was found inside the tomb of Mentuhotep and now resides in the British Museum (BM EA 52831). Another bronze stave is housed at the Louvre (E 3855). Acquired from the Tyszkiewicz collection in 1862, the staff was dated to the Late Period on stylistic criteria. Another relatively undocumented bronze wand is currently on display at the Cairo Museum (JdE 4/12/21/2), similar in appearance to the Boston wands, but with a single head.

Two wooden serpents were more recently identified in the MFA’s collection. The more significant piece came from Reisner’s joint Harvard University-MFA expedition to Deir el-Bersha and was dated to the Twelfth Dynasty, making this the earliest datable serpent wand from Egypt. The second wand of unknown provenance was obtained from the collections of Robert Hay and C. Granville Way in 1872 (Fig. 49). Another small wooden serpent wand currently resides in the Manchester Museum (EGY180A).

Another specific kind of protective amulet from ancient Egypt was the curved ivory wand or knife. These types of wands were usually associated with childbirth and the protection of mothers and children. The one in figure 50 depicts various deities brandishing serpent staffs and

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38 Tomb 37 of the Birabi, bronze object in the form of a uraeus with a long undulating tail, part of a magician’s equipment, L: 166 cm. British Museum EA 52831.
fierce animals as a means of protection. The magic wand in the collection of the Johns Hopkins Archaeological Museum would have been used by nurses, attending the birth of a child, to draw a protective circle around the mother and her birthing bed. The ivory is carved with images of many protective figures, including the god Bes, a patron of childbirth and the home (see 5.3.5), and images of hippopotamus, serpent, and crocodile deities holding knives in their hands. It is inscribed with texts including one which asks the sun to look down in protection (Fig. 51). According to Borghouts (1995:1780) the wand engravings that represented the powers of demons, animals, and gods were intended to symbolize victory of the gods over evil forces. The worn tip of the wand suggests that it saw much use in these kinds of rituals. On its back is an inscription regarding the wand’s owner, though some of this information is no longer legible due to damage. It reads: “The child Mery born to the lady of the house [missing name].” In all these examples, serpentine form assures control over serpents and their power—both physical and magical.

5.5 Jewelry

Before jewelry was considered a statement of personal adornment, it was worn for its amuletic value. The particular combination of materials, design, and inscriptions were purposefully chosen to create protective talismans against demons and dangerous creatures (Figs. 52 and 53). Some amuletic jewelry made during the first half of the second millennium BC shows the same range of creatures and symbols as the apotropaic wands. A gold and silver bangle is decorated with baboons, hares, hawks, snakes, a turtle, two finger amulets, the symbol of the goddess Bastet,
wedjat eyes and ankh and djed signs (Fig. 54). Its purpose was probably to place the wearer within a protective circle (Pinch 1994:115).

Boyce (1995:348; 349; 355) compiled information and drawings about necklaces and pendants from Tell el-Amarna in Petrie’s Tell el-Amarna volume of 1894 and City of Akhenaten II and III. He mentions four different pieces of amuletic serpent jewelry:

- B5 uraeus, large form, not a collar/necklace design
- B6 uraeus (unknown)
- E3 uraeus and cartouche, ring bezel
- E6 wedjat-eye and nefer-hieroglyphs, bezel

According to Boyce’s notes, four examples of the B6 uraeus design were recorded from the Central City. Two were found in the Great Palace, one in the Great Aten Temple magazines and one in building Q42.7 when the first of the two buildings was excavated in 1932-1933.

Leonard Woolley (1922:59) also mentioned the discovery of a ring bezel in the shape of the Eye of Horus at Tell el-Amarna, as well as the existence of painted clay figurines of uraeus snakes that were presumably cult objects.

A gold snake-deity pendant was found in one of the shrines dedicated to the ‘Great Enchantress’ in Tutankhamen’s tomb that had been largely overlooked since Carter’s discovery and subsequent notes:

Goddess with plumed and horned head-dress and snake body, suckling a standing figure of the King. Made of heavy plate gold on? Two large suspension rings at back, just below head-dress. Inscription on base. Dimensions. Pendant H. 14 cm, max. width 7.3 cm max. thickness 0.6 [cm].

Uphill (1977:29) noticed some discrepancies between previous analysis of the shrine as a domestic scene and the actual function of the shrine itself. Therefore, he believes that the ‘Great

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Enchantress’ is probably Wadjet, as she was closely connected to the king, and that the scenes with the queen depict acts performed at the ceremony.

5.6 Ritualistic and Symbolic Activities

5.6.1 Execration

Certain artifacts were created especially for destructive purposes. The ancient Egyptians strongly believed in a transference of power from a live creature to a symbolic one and vice versa, as seen with the wax cat figurine mentioned previously. During feasts and religious processions during the reign of Ramesses III, images of Apophis were shaped from wax and papyrus and then were exposed to various forms of torture, representing his defeat by Ra and Maat. The Egyptians believed that the torture of an object fashioned after the god would handicap his power in the physical world.

It was common practice to burn wax effigies of Apophis at the Temple of Ra in Thebes. The Book of Overthrowing Apep contained instructions on how to destroy these effigies. The priest was to place the figure on the ground and stomped on it with his left foot until it was disfigured completely. Then the priest would cut up the shapeless mass with a flint knife and threw the pieces into a specially prepared fire. This was supposed to be done religiously every morning, noon, and night, as well as when clouds and rain blocked the sun (Cohn 2001:22).

An example of one of these special snake-repellant fires is mentioned by Bourgery and Ponchont (qtd. in Sauneron 1989:186):

Le feu magique est promené tout autour du camp. Il y pétille l’hyèbe, le galbanum exotique y suinte; le tamaris au feuillage sans joie, le cosmos oriental, la souveraine panacée, la centaurée thessalienne et le peucédane craquent dans les flammes, avec le thapsia de l’Eryx; et l’on y brûle le mélèze et l’aurore dont la fumée est nuisible aux serpents, et les bois du cerf né loin de là. Ainsi la nuit devient sans danger pour les soldats.
The magic fire is walked around the camp. There sparkles the hive, the exotic galbanum oozes; the tamarisk with all the joyless foliage, the Eastern cosmos, the sovereign panacea, the Thessalian centaury and the peucedane crack in the flames with the thapsia of Eryx; and there one burns larch and dawn, the smoke of which is harmful to serpents, and the antlers of the stag born far from thee. So the night becomes safe for the soldiers.

The burning of these elements was evidently believed to repel snakes because the soldiers were safe when they returned to their camp at night.

Apophis’ glyph also possessed a serpent in his determinative. In this inscription, the snake sign serving as a determinative has a regular form, while in later writings (from the Coffin Texts onwards) it was commonly mutilated to symbolically strip the serpent of its power.

A spell from the Pyramid Texts that is found in the passage to the sarcophagus chamber on the south wall states “[t]his is here the (hard) [Eye of Horus. Place it in your hand] that you may be sure of victory and that he (Seth) may fear you!” Breaking of two red jars” (PT 244:249). These red vessels were meant to symbolize Set (Muhlestein 2008:2). The spell was targeted towards him and it imbued his essence within them. Smashing the jars was an example of sympathetic magic that would negatively affect the god and thereby protect the caster from his influence.

5.6.2 Ritual Ball Game

Other rituals included usage of the protective Eye of Horus. A number of temple scenes at Dendera, Deir el-Bahri, Luxor, and Philae depict the pharaoh participating in a ritual ball game. A fifteenth-century BC wall relief in the temple of Hatshepsut shows Thutmose III holding a bent

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40 In the tomb of Ankhtifi there are no examples of mutilated signs except for the crocodile with an arrow in its neck. See Morenz 2003:92–93.
olive branch in one hand and a softball-sized ball in the other. It also portrays two priests with their arms raised, ready to catch the ball that symbolized the evil eye of Apophis (Crowther 2007:28). The pharaoh’s strike with the branch would damage the ball and blind the serpent so that he would not be able to spread darkness and unhappiness throughout the pharaoh’s kingdom (Jacq 1998:135). This ceremony reflects the belief that the gaze of the serpent was dangerous and hypnotic, which is why artistic representations often show them maimed (as seen in the example of Apophis’ determinative) or facing the opposite direction.

5.6.3 The Mehen Game

As previously mentioned, the Coffin Texts (758-760) describe Mehen as having nine spherical rings which constantly circle and protect Ra in his nightly travels. According to Piccione (1990:46), the serpent board game dating to as early as the Predynastic Period was modelled after this description of Mehen. Mundkur (1983:62) suggests that the game was intended to be played by the spirit of the dead. They rolled a marble away from the serpent’s head in the center of the board, and the marble was supposed to settle in one of the indentations on the serpent’s body. This was considered ‘winning’, and so the spirit was spared from the serpent’s assault (Figs. 55-57). As the game was based on Mehen, a serpent guardian of the underworld, perhaps in winning the game the deceased’s ka took on a role similar to Ra, and Mehen was tasked to defend him or her against evil underworld serpents.

5.7 Conclusion

The ancient Egyptians created and used many different forms of apotropaic tools as a safeguard against snakes. Serpent staves and ritualistic activities employed sympathetic magic to rid the
people of the threat posed by snakes. Amulets in particular were commonplace items used to
guard individuals from serpents, often depicting tutelary deities or actual serpents in addition
to spells as a protective measure. Even ancient jewelry incorporating serpent imagery
originated as a type of portable amulet. It is apparent that ancient people used defensive magic
to protect against the snake and included the creature in amulets. As snakes were such a
constant threat and their attacks seemed to have abnormally sinister effects, the Egyptians
believed that these creatures acted as representatives of supernatural involvement and thus
bites required mythological assistance to be effective.
VI. Conclusion

The evidence suggests that among other things, serpent worship had its origins in fear. The presence of evil ophidian deities since creation explain and justify the very real fear that was felt by the ancient Egyptians. They believed that disorder in the cosmic universe affected humans on an individual level, resulting in the blaming of mishaps on chaotic—often serpentine—entities. Consequently, they employed magicians to prevent and treat snakebites in a number of ways, the most common being the amulet. The use of physical amulets and incantations largely relied upon mythology for curative and protective reasons.

Despite their obvious and persistent fear of serpents, the evidence suggests that the Egyptians did not believe that all live snakes were evil minions of chaos. The Brooklyn Papyrus clearly shows instances of snakes that had bitten someone representing other ‘good’ deities. If all snakes were thought to have existed only to carry out the will of Apophis, no incantations would associate snake bites with anyone other than the demon-snake, and all representations of snakes would be negative.

Perhaps the ancient Egyptians even concluded that not all snakes were being controlled or pushed by some force to harm people. On the one hand, they clearly feared real snakes’ abilities to wreak havoc among the living and dead. This is evidenced by the abundance of amulets and burial charms in the archaeological record. On the other hand, their use of sympathetic magic indicates that the ancient Egyptians employed the serpent’s protective aspects for their own benefit. Many of the healing and protective deities thus possessed serpent aspects or associations, which would not have been possible had the Egyptians viewed
the snake only as a negative entity. What was feared was used to provide protection. What caused harm was also used to heal.

Humans tend to categorize actions and find patterns in the world around them, and this includes classifying the actions of snakes and sorting them generally into good versus evil for the sake of intelligibility. We must remember, though, that cultural categories are often much more complex and are not so binary. But we see that with Egyptian snakes those were not mutually exclusive groupings. There must be a unity of opposites in the world for it to properly function: order versus chaos, light versus dark, etc. The gods possessed both and performed that balancing act themselves, which was then mirrored in nature. Snakes, as embodiments of these opposing forces, were critical to the maintenance of the universe. These creatures were not strictly good or evil; maybe they were playing their part in maintaining order in the universe.

This thesis showcases the importance of many deified serpents and deities with serpent characteristics and associations in the daily lives of ancient Egyptians, whether that importance reflected positive or negative aspects. My aim was to collect all this evidence in one place as a useful resource for future ophiological studies. The western world tends to perpetuate negative views of the snake, and I would like to change that. I hope to bring back at least a slight understanding of the ways of life that were so important to this immense civilization, and convey a new appreciation for serpents as creatures to be understood, admired, and respected, even if from a distance. It is obvious that the ancient Egyptians recognized both roles played by serpents, so why can’t modern people do the same?
Appendix

Fig. 3: Hour Three of the *Book of Gates* from the sarcophagus of Seti I.

Fig. 4: Set keeping Apophis away from Ra while on his journey through the *Amduat*. Egyptian Museum, Cairo.
Fig. 5: Ra in the form of a feline slaying the snake Apophis, Tomb of Inherkha, 1160 BC, Thebes.

Fig. 6: A 20th century facsimile painting from the 19th dynasty New Kingdom tomb of Sennedjem completed by Charles Wilkinson. Metropolitan Museum of Art.
Fig. 7: Original and reconstruction drawing of the serekh of Seth-Peribsen, 2nd dynasty.

Fig. 8: Original and reconstruction drawing of the serekh of Khasekhemwy, Egyptian Museum in Cairo.
Fig. 9: A 19th dynasty statue of Seti I (Ramessid Period) standing underneath the protective set-animal.
Fig. 10: Double-headed god. Theben. Bab el Meluk, Excavation VI. Dynasty XX.

Fig. 11: Drawing of Meretseger on the stela of Paneb, Dyn. XIX, British Museum.
Fig. 12: Offerings to Meretseger depicted on an ostrakon from Deir el-Medina, 19th dynasty. Turin Museum.

Fig. 13: Wedjat-eye Amulet, Third Intermediate Period. Metropolitan Museum of Art.
Fig. 14: Healing Cippus. Limestone and wood, RCIN 84093. Royal Collection Trust.

Fig. 15: Mehen protecting Ra on his solar barque through the underworld.
Fig. 16: From the tomb of Thutmose III in the Valley of the Kings. Mehen surrounds Ra protecting him on the left, while another huge serpent pulls the towing rope to help the sun god reach the horizon.

Fig. 17: Image of Nehebkau as a man with a serpent’s head and tail.
Fig. 18: A drawing of Nehebkau from the *Papyrus of Ani* in the *Book of the Dead*. British Museum.

Fig. 19: Detail of the 4th Hour of the Amduat depicting Nehebkau as a two-headed serpent, Tomb of Thutmose III (KV 34, after Bucher, 1932, pl. IV).

Fig. 20: Depiction of a goddess (possibly Renenutet) found inside the mummy wrappings of Tutankhamun. Egyptian Museum in Cairo.
Fig. 21: Cobra-headed Renenutet nursing an infant, possibly Nepri, on her throne.

Fig. 22: Renenutet receives papyrus plants from Thutmose IV. Stela from Deir el-Medina, Dyn. XIX.
Fig. 23: Djeserkhara offering birds to Renenutet—Djeserkharaseneb’s tomb (TT 38).

Fig. 24: Kenamun adoring the cobra goddess Renenutet – Kenamun’s tomb (TT 93).
Fig. 25: Portrait of Queen Tiy with a Crown of Two Feathers. New Kingdom, Dyn. XVIII. Egyptian Museum in Berlin.

Fig. 26: House-shrine depicting Akhenaten and Nefertiti. New Kingdom, Dyn. XVIII. Egyptian Museum in Berlin.
Fig. 32: Carnelian snake-head amulet. Dyn XII-XIII, Lisht North. MMA.

Fig. 33: Cobra amulet found in Tutankhamun’s mummy bandages.
Fig. 34: This *uraeus* dates from the reign of Senusret I. Now resides in the Egyptian Museum of Cairo.

Fig. 35: The double *uraeus* with a sun disk and wings at Kom Ombo.
Fig. 36: A defensive Bes plaque showing the god grasping a serpent and brandishing a sword, Ptolemaic—Early Roman Period, ca. 300 BC—1st century AD. MMA.

Fig. 37: Faience amulet of the God Bes, Third Intermediate Period. H: 3.7 cm. MMA.
Fig. 38: Headrest with Images of the god Bes, ca. 1539-1190 BC, wood. Brooklyn Museum.

Fig. 39: Front and back of a miniature cippus amulet (H: 5.07 cm), Late Period. JHAM.
Fig. 40: Metternich Stela from the reign of Nectanebo II, XIII Dynasty. MMA.

Fig. 41: Wall painting in the 15th century BC tomb of Sennufer depicting priests holding serpent staffs.
Fig. 42: Serpent staffs before the lion goddess Sekhmet at the Temple of Isis at Philae. 370 BC.

Fig. 43: Thoth holding serpent staffs in the temple of Seti I at Abydos. 13th century BC.

Fig. 44: Figure of Horus on the 4th century Metternich Stela grasping serpent rods.
Fig. 45: Scepter from the Tomb of Rekhmire.

Fig. 46: Engraved copper cobra wand excavated at the Ramesseum at Thebes (ca. 2055-1650 BC). Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge.

Fig. 47: Manchester Museum Bastet figure.
Fig. 48: A pair of bronze serpent wands (nos. 2002.3.1-3.2) in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Fig. 49: Wooden serpent wands in the collection of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.
Fig. 50: Apotropaic wand made from hippopotamus ivory. British Museum.

Fig. 51: An inscribed Egyptian magic wand, (JHAM 2121D), ca. 1750 BC.

Fig. 52: Roman period bracelet, ca. 1st century AD. Gold with hinge and pin clasp, ornamented with figures from classical mythology flanked by crowned serpents (probably those of Isis and Serapis). Rogers Fund, 23.2.1. Petrie Museum.
Fig. 53: A pectoral given to Sit-Hathor-Yenet by her father, Sesostris II, whose cartouche it bears, Dyn. XII, ca. 1880 BC. Falcons wearing solar uraei. Gold inlaid with semiprecious gems. Width 3¼ in. Rogers Fund, with contribution from Henry Walters, 16.1.3. Petrie Museum.

Fig. 54: Amuletic bangle in gold and silver, ca. 2000-1800 BC complete with protective figures and animals.
Fig. 55: Limestone game board, probably 2nd Dynasty (2890-2686 BC). British Museum, EA 66216.

Fig. 56: Mehen game with game stones, from Abydos, ca. 3000 BC. Neues Museum.

Fig. 57: Illustration from the tomb of 5th dynasty vizier Rashepses.
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