

Donkeys, Genies, and Demons: Fantastical Creatures in Ancient Egyptian Ritual Texts and Funerary Assemblages

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Abstract

The donkey was depicted in Egyptian tomb scenes since the Old Kingdom. By the end of the Old Kingdom, the donkey represented an ambivalent creature that could either assist the nightly journey of Re or be a malevolent force supporting Seth or Apophis. Depictions of donkeys and hybrid donkey creatures survive from the Third Intermediate Period onward in papyri and they appear as guardians on temple walls during the Greco-Roman period. The spearing or harpooning of donkeys, along with hippopotami, turtles and pigs, continued as a magical and ritual theme after the Late Period with some survival into the early Roman era.

Keywords: donkey, papyrus, demon, genie, late period, Ramesside, temple

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تم تصوير الحمار في مشاهد المقابر المصرية منذ عصر الدولة القديمة. بحلول نهاية عصر الدولة القديمة، كان الحمار يمثل مخلوقًا متناقضًا يمكنه إما أن يساعد في رحلة رع الليلية أو أن يكون قوة خبيثة تدعم سيت أو أبوفيس. صور الحمير ومخلوقات الحمير الهجينة بقيت على قيد الحياة من الفترة الانتقالية الثالثة فصاعدًا في ورق البردي، وتظهر كأوصياء على جدران المعبد خلال الفترة اليونانية الرومانية. استمر طعن الحمير أو طعنها بالحرايب، جنبًا إلى جنب مع أفراس النهر والسلاحف والخنازير، كموضوع سحري وطقوسي بعد العصر المتأخر مع بقاء بعض الشيء حتى أوائل العصر الروماني.

الكلمات المفتاحية: حمار، بردية، الشيطان، الجني، العصر المتأخر، الرعامسة، المعبد

Introduction

During the Late and Third Intermediate Periods, Egypt was exposed to numerous foreign cultures through their rule of the country, new settlements created for the influx of population, and the influences of nonlocal languages on Egyptian society.

The curiosity of those recently settled in the country or of tourists, namely, the Greek and Latin speakers, provides much information about contemporary Egyptian temple cult activities, religion, and their society as a whole. These sources do fill in gaps of knowledge for the intervening centuries following the Ramesside period of rule.

Although some similarities exist between the Greco-Roman and the ancient Egyptian pantheons, the manner in which lower-level spirits or minor deities were classified differed greatly. These types of beings are frequently encountered in ancient Egyptian theologies, funerary papyri, ostraca, and tomb paintings (Kousolis:2011: xi; Hammad: 2018:1; Lloyd 2011:101). The often-quoted terms of 'genie' or 'demon' in scholarly literature today often take on a malevolent tone whereas they did not necessarily refer to that classification or negative aspect of this group of beings in ancient contexts. Although the term 'demon' is used throughout this paper due to its common use in current

literature, one could also substitute either 'entity' or 'spirit' instead.

Given the large amount of recent scholarship into the subjects of ancient Egyptian magic and demonology, a general chronological summary herein of the representations of donkeys and similar hybrid figures from funerary and ritual contexts provides an interesting contrast to more common osteological discussions of these animals from site excavations. The paper will demonstrate that the view of the donkey changed over time into a more malevolent creature that paralleled the evolving perception of the god Seth as antagonistic.

Old and Middle Kingdom

Sources

From its inception until its codification by Dynasty 5 (2392–2282 BC), the Pyramid Texts were first compiled for exclusive use by the Pharaoh. By the later Old Kingdom, these texts began to be used by other ranks of society (Allen: 2005). The spells and utterances in the Pyramid Texts often conjure up imagery of snakes or hybrid snake beings. After the Old Kingdom, there is a shift in conceptualizing at least some of the underworld creatures in donkey forms (Vandenbeusch: 2019:138–140).

With the collapse of the Old Kingdom circa 2180 BC, the concept of immortality and resurrection slowly began to be seen as a possibility for other members of Egyptian society. The Coffin Texts are one such example of developments in religious thought and ritual during the transitory period between the decline of the Old Kingdom and the establishment of the Middle Kingdom.

Another body of funeral liturgy developed by Dynasty 12 (1994–1781 BC) is the Book of the Two Ways that appears in private tombs at Deir el-Bersha and at Pharaoh Senwosret 3's tomb at Abydos (Geoga: 2018:44). An important development in the Middle Kingdom ritual and theology is the appearance of the serpent Apophis as the antithesis of Re (Roccati 2011:90). Apophis is discussed later in this paper as he has a more prominent role in later period ritual and texts.

From the late Old Kingdom through the Middle Kingdom, the donkey was shown in association with gods like Shu, Atum, and Min besides its standard depiction of farming or taxation in tomb scenes. In both the Pyramid Texts and the Coffin Texts, the donkey is shown as an ambivalent creature, at times supporting the god Re or being antagonistic toward the god and the crew of the solar boat (Vandenbeusch: 2020: 80).

New Kingdom Sources (Dynasty 18)

During the New Kingdom, the majority of the funerary liturgy centered around the compilation of spells termed the Book of the Dead. Other texts in circulation were the Book of the Amduat since the time of Thutmosis 3 and the Book of the Gates which appeared during the reign of Horemheb.

In this period, the concept of 'demons' was divided into two categories. There was a stationary type, fixed to a location in the underworld (*sawtyw*), like the gate guardians (aka 'genies'), and other mobile types ('wanderers' *shemayw*; 'slaughterers' (i.e., Pyramid Text 1535) *khatyw*, and 'messengers' (dead decan

gods) *wepwtyw*) that afflict humans with diseases, nightmares, demonic possession, or other punishments (Kaper:2003; Lucarelli:2011). During this period, such forces could be portrayed in various ways including fully anthropomorphic, fully animal, or a hybrid of the two.

Demons that are stationary in nature normally guard openings or entrances of restricted access and therefore act as the ‘guardians’ of the gates to the “House of Osiris” (for example, Book of the Dead Vignettes 144–147, Book of the Gates and Book of the Night). They sometimes also guarded the deceased Pharaoh or deceased commoners during their journey to the afterlife. In their protective stance, they might be carrying knives, spears, daggers, torches, or ankhs. Occasionally, they might be depicted holding snakes or lizards in their hands.

A few examples of funerary sculpture and art from Dynasty 18 show some composite creatures portrayed by artists in private funerary contexts. Wooden statues of underworld beings were found in the tomb of Thutmosis 3 (KV 34) with the heads of hippos, sheep, and turtles (British Museum EA 50699, 50702–50704). The entity with a turtle head is tentatively identified with the god Apesh or Sheta in Middle Kingdom Coffin Texts (Budge: 1969: 376; El-Khady: 2011: 60).

Another interesting example of hybrid creatures comes from the second inner shrine of Pharaoh Tutankhamun (KV62; Cairo 60660) which shows a donkey-headed guardian, corresponding to Book of the Dead Chapter 144 (Figure 1). This shrine is also the only attested use of a rare “Enigmatic Book of the Netherworld” (Geoga: 2018).

New Kingdom Sources (Ramesside Era)

During the later New Kingdom into the Ramesside era, a number of special compilations were created and circulated alongside the standard Book of the Dead spells (McCarthy: 2022). These works include the Book of Caverns (Dynasty 20; Werning: 2019), the Ramesside Book of Heaven and Book of Earth (also called Book of Aker), and the late Ramesside Book of the Creation of the Solar Disk.

The Books of Heaven and Earth are mainly known from the royal tombs of Seti I (KV17) and Ramesses 3 (KV11). These two books further evolved to include the Book of Nut, the Book of Day, and the Book of Night. The Book of Day, in particular, appears in the royal tombs of Ramesses 6 (KV9) and 9 (KV6), Osorkon 2, and Sheshonq 3.

Royal tombs once again provide a wealth of information showing the evolving appearances of otherworldly beings in private funerary contexts. The tomb of Queen Nefertari (QV 66) provides wall painting versions of the guardians addressed in the Book of the Dead Chapter 144 (McDonald: 1996; McCarthy: 2002). The tomb of Ramesses 6 (KV9) also has numerous examples of donkey-headed beings illustrated from the Book of Day, including a donkey-headed deity leading the solar boat. In Hour 6 of the Book of the Day, Seth is commanded to challenge Apophis so that the solar boat can pass.

Private tombs such as that of Nebwenenef (Theban Tomb 157) show the harpooning of both turtles and hippopotami. The tomb of Nakht-Amun (Theban Tomb 335) possibly shows two donkeys sitting back to back resting on ankh and sa amulets

while symbolizing the Aker lions (Vandenbuesch: 2020: 86: Fig. 29).

Third Intermediate Period

Sources and Later

By the Third Intermediate Period, unlucky events in everyday life were commonly associated with negative spirits. Events such as foreign invasions or plagues that affected communities were attributed to malevolent forces (Lucarelli: 2011:116). At this time, guardians of the underworld gates began to be depicted on Late Period temple walls. Such figures were also borrowed from traditional funerary literature and used in conjunction with the Osirian cultic activities at Dendera now (ibid: 121). Two examples, statuary commissioned by Nectanebo I for the Atum Temple of Heliopolis (Bologna Museo Civico KS 1870) and Psamtik I (British Museum EA 20), show the pharaohs worshipping obscure hybrid deities (Lucarelli: 2010).

The tradition of the unlucky epagomenal days around the Egyptian New Year followed a post-Ramesside era pattern already present in Dynasty 23 (867–724 BC). Oracular decrees from Karnak state that spirit ‘gangs’ were associated with the Theban triad, Montu, Maat, and the deified Amenemope (Lucarelli: 2009: 235).

During the epagomenal days, various deities, popularly the goddesses Sekhmet or Bastet, would unleash negative wandering spirits, called ‘her arrows’ (sheserw) of sickness and death. Such ‘arrows’ of demons were often described as seven in number. Besides being released by Sekhmet or Bastet, these spirits were also associated with Neith or the god Tutu-Apathes (Lucarelli:

2011:122; Kaper 2003). In the Bremner-Rhind Papyrus (B.M. 10188), these demons are led by Sekhmet and ordered to vanquish Apophis. These beings are also referenced in the temple inscriptions at Dendera and Edfu (Lucarelli: 2009: 237; Roccati 2011).

Beyond this particular type of negative spirits, other beings occupied zones between order (maat) and chaos (isfet) like water, mountains, caves, pits, and border desert zones. These locations were seen as doorways into other dimensions. This class of entities was controlled by Bastet, Sekhmet, Hathor, Nekhbet, Osiris, Re, and Seth (Hammad: 2018:3-4).

Donkey-headed beings continue to be portrayed on private coffins and papyri such as the Dynasty 21 coffin of Padjamun from Deir el-Bahari (Cairo Egyptian Museum) (Chassinat: 1909: Pl. IX: 6020B). Other contemporary funerary examples show a bound donkey (Papyrus Vienna Vindob. Aeg. 3859A & B or donkey-headed guardians of the gates (Pap. Djedkhonsu-*iu.f* ankh, CG 166) (Figures 2 and 3)).

As mentioned earlier, some powerful spirits might be depicted seated and holding either writhing snakes or lizards. One such example is a donkey-headed enthroned deity holds a lizard by its tail identified as Osiris-Imyout) (Pap. Tashedkhonsu, CG 40016 & CG531). The lizard with its regeneration ability for lost limbs was a symbol of immortality. Lizards were also associated with Osiris and Anubis in the act of the mummification process (Vandenbuesch: 2020: 141-142). Examples from Dynasty 30 (380–342 BC) of the Book of the Amduat Hour 4 also show donkey-headed

anthropomorphic beings with names associating them with aspects of the god Re (ibid).

The familiar Ptolemaic temples like Hibis, Edfu, Kom Ombo, Philae, Medinet Habu, and Dendera reflect a continued Pharaonic cult, temple architecture, and temple reliefs including a multiplicity of beast ‘cryptoforms’ (Lucarelli 2010: 87; Klotz: 2014; Vuilleumier: 2022). In some instances, the hybrid creatures added to the pervasive theme of the eternal struggle between good and evil. Alongside temple reliefs were the dramatizations of this struggle acted out during the Khoiak festivals held at Abydos, Edfu, and Pelusium or the Triumph of Horus festival at Edfu.

By the Third Intermediate Period, the god Seth began to be seen as a leader of demonic forces or the personification of evil. Clearly, his position had shifted greatly from his portrayal in the Pyramid Texts and New Kingdom era where he held a prominent place on the solar boat. This theme (Chapter 108 of Book of the Dead) appears again in Dynasty 21 (1064–940 BC) in the Papyrus of Horweben-khet B (Cairo JE 19323) for example. At this time, the main animals associated with Seth now were the pig and the donkey, both seen as ‘unclean’ (Lucarelli: 2011: 118). Other animals added to this list much later are the elephant, boar, and domesticated pig (Kitat: 2011). Snakes and scorpions also became linked with the god Set on protective sculptures (cippus) for example. After the fifth century BC, the god Seth became linked with the Greek god Typhon (Lucarelli: 2017). As contemporary Egyptian magic and ritual evolved through the Roman period, the specific depiction of spearing donkeys or

black pigs continued to be a favored potent image of conquering Typhon-Set (Hernandez: 2012).

Reflections on Two Popular Animal Forms in Ancient Egyptian Art—The Horse and the Hippo

In contrast to the long tradition of depicting the donkey in funerary or ritual contexts of Egyptian art, the examples of the horse and hippo provide two divergent trajectories of how animal types were inherently beloved or shown in an ambivalent manner depending on private, funerary, or ritual contexts.

The horse was present in Egypt by the Hyksos period (1650–1535 BC). From its first appearance, probably with the foreign rulers, the horse was connected to concepts like royalty, victory, and nobility besides obvious military and chariotry associations (Vandenbeusch: 2020: 16; Tatomir: 2014). Since the start of the New Kingdom, the symbol of Pharaoh in his chariot subduing chaos and disorder was ever-present in art and architecture. An interesting example from the first pylon of the South Tower at Medinet Habu shows Ramesses III in his chariot chasing various animals associated with chaos, including donkeys (The Epigraphic Survey: 1932: Pl. 116). Unlike the donkey or the hippopotamus, as we shall see, the horse was never portrayed with an ambivalent nature, and negative examples were not focused upon in ancient Egyptian art.

The hippopotamus, like the donkey, began appearing very early in ancient Egyptian art with an ambivalent nature. It seems that the male hippo was singled

out as more aggressive while the female hippo was regarded as motherly and protective of her offspring. This division is largely the reason that male hippopotami are speared in funerary or magical scenes (i.e., the Osiride chapel at Dendera) while the female hippo was seen as the embodiment of various goddesses like Rertu, Ipet, Taweret, and Sheput (Budge: 1969: 359).

During the reign of Amenhotep III and afterward, the hippo goddess Taweret was associated with the god Bes for success in fertility, childbirth, and child-rearing (Freed et al.: 1999: 256-7; Cat. Nos. 179-180). This was especially the case in the private and ritual spheres. Examples supporting this are the royal chairs for Yuya, Thuya, Princess Sitamun, and Pharaoh Tutankhamun all portray Taweret in the company of the god Bes (i.e., Cairo CG 51113; Turin Egyptian Museum; Robins: 1995: 87-98; Roberts: 2001: 142, Fig. 149; Müller: 2004: Fig. 61) and worship of Bes and Taweret at el-Amarna village in the private sphere. Later well-known examples of Taweret include her depiction in the Papyrus of Ani (Wasserman: 1998: Section 186; Pl. 37), Hathor in the guise of the hippo at the temple of Nefertari at Abu Simbel (James:2002: 228), and the Taweret statue commissioned for Princess Nitocris in Dynasty 26 (Cairo GC 39194).

Depictions of the goddess Taweret continued in later times like at the Ptolemaic birth houses (mammisi) of Philae, Kom Ombo, Dendera, and Edfu. Hippo creatures also appear in protective modes at the Ptolemaic temple of Athribis (Wanina), Coptos, Dendera, and the Ptolemaic chapel at Deir el-Bahari (Ali:2023:102 ff).

Final Thoughts

Although depictions of fantastical creatures in ancient Egypt captured the imagination of the public, until recently, the lack of detailed scholarship to identify these creatures and their particular functions in funerary or ritual contexts has been lacking. Donkey hybrid creatures along with hippopotamus beings are some of the most memorable entities encountered in later ancient Egyptian funerary papyri or temple reliefs, and both show divergent trajectories in how they were viewed from the Old Kingdom until the Greco-Roman era.

Over time, the donkey became seen more as antagonistic with some assimilation to the god Seth while the hippo deities continued to have both negative (male) and positive protective (female) aspects related to Seth and Taweret, respectively. Although the introduction of the horse came relatively late into Egyptian art and temple spaces, it remains interesting that the horse never waivered in its positive and regal attributes or gained a separate status as a composite deity.

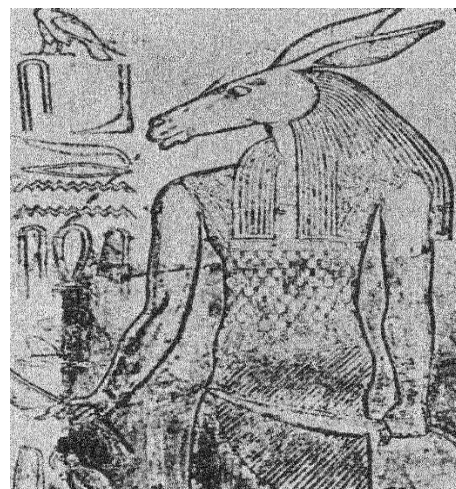


Figure 1: Donkey guardian, King Tutankhamun's Second Shrine (Cairo Egyptian Museum JE 60666) after Reed 1987.

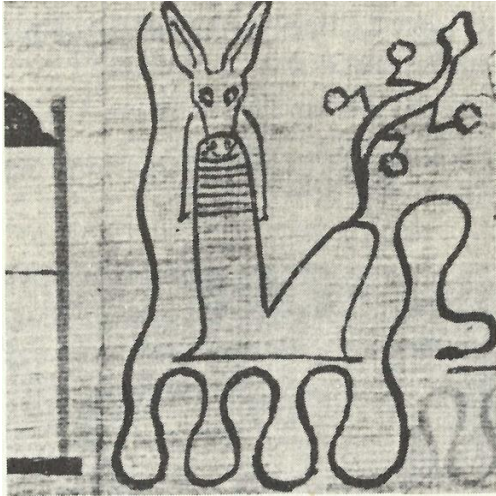


Figure 2: Papyrus of Djedkhonsouiefankh II showing donkey entity holding a lizard (Cairo Egyptian Museum CG 166) after Reed 1987.



Figure 3: Papyrus of Tashedkhons showing an enthroned Osiris creature holding a lizard (Cairo Egyptian Museum CG 40016) after Reed 1987.

Conflicts of Interest

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