

Apophis

I. Introduction. *Destructive annihilating divine power in Egyptian mythology.* A. is attested in Egyptian texts since the 20th cent., and has always been depicted in the form of a →serpent since the New Kingdom (15th cent. onward). He represents the power which opposes creation and order; the uncreated which constantly irrupts into creation. He menacingly blocks the nocturnal journey of the sun god →Re traveling in his bark; and threatens to drink up the Nun, the primordial ocean which surrounds the created world and constitutes the source of regeneration. A. is the prototype of entirely negative destructive power. However, the overthrowing of A. by the creator god Re and his helpers causes a renewed creative energy to unfold. The mere existence of A. triggers the development of creative, positive power.

This article concentrates particularly on the 1st mill. In this period →Seth, the other god considered responsible for disruption of created order, is regularly assimilated to A. Whereas A. threatens creation as a whole, Seth is more of a troublemaker in divine and human social order. During the 2nd mill. Seth is still a very ambivalent figure, regularly shown in a positive role as the one who helps the sun god Re overthrow A. As such, he still occasionally figures in early 1st mill. iconography (12a*). By the mid-1st mill., however, Seth becomes as negative and menacing as A., and both are subject to constant ritual annihilation. Such a ritual is preserved on the 4th cent. papyrus Bremner-Rhind (Papyrus British Museum no. 10188), *The Book of Overthrowing Apophis*, which also gives a precise description of A. (see FAULKNER 1937; FAULKNER 1938). In this kind of text A. is frequently said to be destroyed by fire, a concept which was ritually reenacted by throwing wax figurines of serpents or papyrus sheets picturing A. into the fire.

An inventory of serpents (Papyrus Brooklyn Museum no. 47.218.48; SAUNERON 1989: 9, 148f) describes A. as “a big snake, entirely red, his belly being white, with four teeth in its mouth; when it bites one dies immediately.” This description allows no identification with any known species, although the four teeth refer to the family of the cobra. The color red is generally associated with evil beings or things. In any case, A. was imagined as a giant monstrous creature rather than one identified with an actual species of serpent.

Texts also describe A. as a turtle, an identification which seems to appear in

iconography only in the Graeco-Roman Period (→IDD 2), mainly in temple decoration.

In Egyptian reality and mythology, serpents were considered both as threatening, harmful beings as well as beneficent and protecting. Especially in scenes that show the nocturnal journey of the sun god, both types of serpents frequently appear close to each other. The images, however, never show A. actually deploying his power but always picture him being overpowered and having some kind of physical violence inflicted on him: his head is being cut off with a knife or he is being speared by a god standing on the bow of the sun bark. Frequently a variable number of knives are inserted in his flesh; his body can also be lassoed (in New Kingdom depictions). In other scenes his head is being pushed to the ground by the paw of the →cat representing Re, who holds a knife in his other forefoot. Although the accompanying texts or legends often identify him explicitly by his name (*ꜥꜣꜣ*, *ꜥꜣꜣ*), the violence imposed on the serpent unmistakably characterizes it as A. The destruction by fire often mentioned in texts does not appear in iconography.

It is doubtful whether the image of Seth slaying A. appears in Near Eastern iconography. Several seals represent a Seth-like god spearing a serpent, which generally has two horns (→Baal 6, 17; KEEL 1990: 309–320, figs. 83–88; KEEL 1992: 212, 247, figs. 222–227), a feature absent from the Egyptian rendering of A. Although conceptually related to the Egyptian myth, these images are more likely to show →Baal slaying the serpent →Yam.

II. Typology

II.1. Phenotypes

1. FLAT (1–3) 2. COILED 2.1. With knives (4–11) 2.2. Being speared (12a, 13–15) 2.3. Head being cut off (12b, 16–20) 2.4 Not defeated/injured (21)

GENERAL REMARKS. There are no three-dimensional representations of A. Figurines in wax and clay were produced, but because of the danger they represented they were ritually destroyed immediately after fabrication. Representations of A. are always theriomorphic.

1. **FLAT.** The reptile can be shown lying flat with a number of knives stuck in its body (1), or subdued by means of a spear (2–3).

2. **COILED.** Most often the →serpent is shown with a varying number of coils (between one and nineteen loops), which are generally arranged horizontally (4–8, 12*–21). More elaborate examples show the animal with three vertical piles of coils (9–10*), or with alternatively piled-up and

horizontal coils (11). The reptile can also be winding through a tree (16*). Frequently the animal has a dotted skin (2–4, 6*–11, 16*, 20).

2.1. With knives. The most frequent depiction of A. is that of a coiled serpent with a number of knives (between four and twelve) stuck into different parts of its body (4–11). These injuries show the defeated state of the dangerous creature. With the exception of (8), no active oppressor is present in these scenes.

2.2. Being speared. The coiled serpent is actively defeated by a spear thrown in its mouth (12a*–15).

2.3 Head being cut off. A. can be shown in front of an oppressor who is about to cut off his head (12b*, 16–20).

2.4. Not defeated/injured. It is most exceptional to find a representation of A. where he is neither being defeated nor injured by knives, but clearly identified by the context (21).

II.2. Associations

1. ASSOCIATED WITH DEITIES/DEMONS 1.1. Re (–Harakhte) (1, 5–7, 9–11, 16–21) 1.2. Seth (12a) 1.3. Horus (15) 1.4. Maat (21) 1.5. Isis and Nephthys (6) 1.6. Monkey-headed figure (12b) 2. ASSOCIATED WITH HUMANS: Deceased (2–3, 8, 13–14)

GENERAL REMARKS. The slaughter of A. appears in two different mythological contexts. First, during the nocturnal journey of the sun god →Re traveling in his bark, A. is subdued by gods who surround and help the solar god. Images of the nocturnal journey of Re first appear in the New Kingdom royal netherworld book Amduat, a large text–and–image composition which traces the entire journey of the sun through the netherworld during the twelve hours of the night and its process of regeneration and “rebirth” in the morning. A. appears twice: in the seventh hour of the night he threatens the progression of the sun god by drinking the water on which he sails, but fetters are thrown around his body by various gods and goddesses who accompany Re. A mention of A. opposing the sun is made at the very end of the composition, in the twelfth hour, in relation to the reappearance of the new sun as a →scarab (HORNUNG 1972). Conceptions very similar to those described in the Amduat are already expressed in funerary texts of the Middle Kingdom (20th–17th cent.), the Coffin Texts (BICKEL 1998: 43–48), where the name of A. is determined by the hieroglyph of a serpent with a knife stuck in its neck. In the New Kingdom (15th–11th cent.) the theme of overwhelming A. figures in several other royal funerary compositions which all treat the phenomenon of the sun’s regeneration (Book of the Gates, Book of the Day, etc. [HORNUNG

1982: 165–176]). It is typical of this mythological conception that Re’s foe is not overcome by Re himself but by other gods, mainly →Seth and →Horus. Pictures of the 1st mill. often combine the two essential aspects of overpowering the menacing A., and the sun god’s regeneration and reappearance in the morning as a scarab.

In a second major group of representations A. is overcome by Re himself, mostly represented as a →cat. These images clearly relate to spell 17 of the Book of the Dead, attested since the early 18th dyn. (15th cent.).

1. ASSOCIATED WITH DEITIES/DEMONS

1.1. Re(–Harakhte). Numerous vignettes of early 1st mill. (21st–22nd dyn.) sarcophagi and funerary papyri show the expected result of the permanent confrontation between A. and →Re with his followers: A. is subdued, his destructive power is under control. No action is indicated; the defeated state of the foe is shown by its position underneath the sun bark. In the present examples Re sits in the center of the bark, either with a scarab as his head (9) or in his nocturnal appearance with a ram’s head (10*). Traveling in his bark over a recumbent serpent (21), the sun god may also be depicted as falcon-headed →Re–Harakhte.

The triumph of Re over A. can furthermore be rendered as a mere combination of symbols. Again, the →serpent is placed under the sun bark. The sun god can be represented as a large →scarab (6*) which may be protected by two winged cobras (7), or as a winged scarab (11). In the case of 1 the representations refer more closely to the central scene of the Amduat. A stabbed serpent lies in front of the sun bark, which is towed by several gods toward the arms of Shu, out of which the sun god appears on earth in the form of a scarab. This image combines features of the 7th and 12th hours of the Amduat.

The sun god appears with a double →ram’s head with two arms emerging from a disc (recalling the arms of the god →Shu in the final scene of the Amduat), which are held over the coiled serpent (5).

In the context of spell 17 of the Book of the Dead, Re is generally pictured as a →cat (16*–20), a feature which is explained by a phonetic pun. Occasionally it is even clearly a female cat that slays the serpent with a knife (20). The image of A. being cut, which accompanies the Book of the Dead spell, is described as “annihilating the enemies of the lord of all.” The event is located in Heliopolis, next to the so-called ished–

tree. A tree is part of most scenes which show the cat slaying the serpent (16*–20). In one instance the two features, tree and serpent, are artistically combined (16*).

1.2. Seth. A. may also be actively overthrown. The god →Seth in his beneficent aspect stands on the bow of the bark and spears a long serpent, which rises up sticking out its tongue menacingly (12a*). However, this iconography, to which Middle Kingdom (20th–17th cent.) Coffin Texts already refer, disappears rapidly during the 1st mill. because of the increasingly negative assessment of Seth.

1.3. Horus. During the 1st mill. the action and pose of →Seth are frequently taken over by →Horus. The god stands in the bow of the sun bark and subdues the serpent with a long spear (15). Horus spearing A. is a frequent theme in Ptolemaic temple decoration (→IDD 2).

1.4. Maat. On papyrus 21 the goddess →Maat, who represents justice and order, stands in the bow of the bark in which enthroned →Re–Harakhte travels. She is shown casting a spell against the recumbent serpent underneath the bark, thus dominating the symbol of disorder A.

1.5. Isis and Nephtys. The sun bark is occasionally replaced by the sign of heaven. On 6* a long, coiled serpent is shown under the sign of heaven on which →Isis and Nephtys stand flanking a large scarab. This image already expresses the association of A. and Seth, the former being the foe of the sun god (scarab), and the latter the enemy of →Osiris, to whom the goddesses Isis and Nephtys refer.

1.6. Monkey-headed figure. A rare variant of the theme of spell 17 of the Book of the Dead shows a standing monkey-headed figure holding the serpent and cutting his neck (12b*).

2. ASSOCIATED WITH HUMANS: Deceased. The deceased for whom the sarcophagus or papyrus has been prepared can be pictured as substituting for the god in the act of spearing A. He can either stand in the bow (2, 13) or in front (3) of the boat. These images show the man as an active and courageous helper of the sun god →Re who, thanks to his intervention in favor of the creator, merits the privilege of being accepted in the sun bark and integrated into the cosmic cycle. In solar contexts but without the immediate presence of the bark, the deceased can also be shown standing with a long knife in front of a huge →serpent (8) or spearing the A. serpent at his feet (14). Similar images of a man spearing a serpent or fighting against serpents and other animals representing negative powers (→cro-

codile, →hippopotamus, →donkey, or onyx, though not explicitly A.) with a knife also appear as vignettes to several spells of the Book of the Dead.

III. Sources

III.1. Chronological range. Although the concept of →Re overcoming A. is probably already alluded to in the Pyramid Texts (c. 2400), clear textual reference only appears in the Coffin Texts (20th–17th cent.). Iconographically A. is first represented in the 18th dyn. (15th cent.), in the composition of the Amduat and in the vignette of Book of the Dead spell 17. Depictions of A. are then known until the Roman Period (→IDD 2).

III.2. Geographical distribution.

With the possible exception of Palestine/Israel, where the attribution to A. of serpents on seals is most uncertain (see § I), images of this negative power are restricted to Egypt.

III.3. Object types. During the 1st mill. visual sources generally stem from funerary contexts, mainly papyri (1, 3–5, 12*–13, 15, 17–21) and sarcophagi (2, 6*–11, 16*). Although the royal funerary composition of the Amduat inscribed in New Kingdom (15th–11th cent.) royal tombs is the principal source for 1st mill. representations, the private funerary papyri, which reproduce a shorter version of this book, do not feature A. (SADEK 1985).

New Kingdom temple decoration occasionally shows the scene of →Seth subduing A., e.g., fragments at Medinet Habu (THE EPIGRAPHIC SURVEY 1963: pl. 421). The scene of A. being speared appears relatively frequently in Ptolemaic temples (→IDD 2).

The Amduat scenes (1–3, 8, 12a*–15, 21) appear in royal tombs from the 18th–20th dynasty. Rare examples of the scene with the →cat (16*–20) are also shown in Theban private tombs of the 19th/20th dyn. (e.g., BRUYÈRE 1933: pl. 20 [TT 359]). A pyramidion (14) stems from a private tomb in Abydos of the mid–1st mill.

IV. Conclusion. Scenes 1–12a*, 13–15 and 21 derived from the underworld books symbolize the confrontation between organized creation and the uncreated. The fact that the creator god and his helpers overcame this dangerous challenge every night provided a source of confidence in the permanence of the created world order and in eternal existence in the beyond. The mythological background of the scene with the cat (16*–20), i.e., →Re slaying A. in Heliopolis, refers to the same idea of overwhelming the menace that threatens creation in one of the principal primordial

sites. With very rare exceptions in the 19th–20th dyn. (HORNUNG 1975 and 21), A. is, for apotropaic reasons, always shown as a mutilated and dominated →serpent. The menace he represents is figured as already, though only temporarily, under control.

V. Catalogue

1 Papyrus, Thebes, 1100–900. NIWIŃSKI 1989: fig. 81 2 Coffin, wood, Thebes, 1100–900. NIWIŃSKI 1995: fig. 80 3 Papyrus, Thebes, 1100–900. NIWIŃSKI 1989: pl. 12. 4 Papyrus, Thebes, 1100–900. PIANKOFF 1957: pl. 7 5 Papyrus, Thebes, 1100–900. NIWIŃSKI 1989: pl. 46a 6* Coffin, wood, Thebes, 1100–900. Cairo, Egyptian Museum, CGC 6070. NIWIŃSKI 1995: fig. 74 7 Coffin, wood, Thebes, 1100–900. NIWIŃSKI 1995: fig. 16 8 Coffin, wood, Thebes, 1100–900. CHASSINAT 1909: pl. 14 9 Coffin, wood, Thebes, 1100–900. NIWIŃSKI 1995: fig. 30 10* Coffin, wood, Thebes, 1100–900. Cairo, Egyptian Museum, CGC 6076. NIWIŃSKI 1995: fig. 86 11 Coffin, wood, Thebes, 1100–900. NIWIŃSKI 1995: fig. 79 12a* Papyrus, Thebes, 1100–900. Cairo, Egyptian Museum. PIANKOFF 1957: pl. 2 (beneath/in front of bark) 12b* Papyrus, Thebes, 1100–900. Cairo, Egyptian Museum. PIANKOFF 1957: pl. 2 (behind bark) 13 Papyrus, Thebes, 1100–900. NIWIŃSKI 1989: fig. 58 14 Pyramidion, limestone, Abydos, 700–500. DE MEULENAERE 1967–68: pl. 1 15 Papyrus, Thebes, 1100–900. PIANKOFF 1957: pl. 19 16* Coffin, wood, Thebes, 1100–900. Cairo, Egyptian Museum CGC 6076, NIWIŃSKI 1995: fig. 82 17 Papyrus, Thebes, 1100–900. BUDGE 1912: pl. 14 18 Papyrus, Thebes, 1100–900. BUDGE 1912: pl. 43 19 Papyrus, Thebes, 1100–900. BUDGE 1912: pl. 87 20 Papyrus, Thebes, 1100–900. PIANKOFF 1957: pl. 15 21 Papyrus, Thebes, 1100–900. NIWIŃSKI 1989: fig. 27

VI. Selected Bibliography

BICKEL 1998 • FAULKNER 1937 • FAULKNER 1938 • HORNUNG 1972 • HORNUNG 1975 • HORNUNG 1982 • SAUNERON 1989

Susanne Bickel

Bibliography

- BICKEL S., 1998, Die Jenseitsfahrt des Re nach Zeugen der Sargtexte, in: BRODBECK A., Ein ägyptisches Glasperlenspiel, Festschrift E. Hornung, Berlin, 41–56.
- BRUYÈRE B., 1933, Rapport sur les fouilles de Deir el Médineh 1930, Cairo.
- BUDGE E.A.W., 1912, The Greenfield Papyrus in the British Museum, London.
- CHASSINAT E., 1909, La seconde trouvaille de Deir el-Bahari (Sarcophages), CGC, Cairo.
- FAULKNER R.O., 1937, The Bremner-Rhind Papyrus – III: JEA 23, 166–185.
- 1938, The Bremner-Rhind Papyrus – IV: JEA 24, 41–53.
- HORNUNG E. 1972, Ägyptische Unterweltsbücher, Zürich/München.
- 1975, Art. Apophis, in: LÄ 1:350–352.
- 1982, Tal der Könige, Ruhestätte der Pharaonen, Zürich/München.
- KEEL O., 1992, Das Recht der Bilder gesehen zu werden (OBO 122), Freiburg Schweiz/Göttingen.
- KEEL O./SHUVAL M./UEHLINGER CH., 1990, Studien zu den Stempelsiegeln aus Palästina/Israel III (OBO 100), Freiburg Schweiz/Göttingen.
- LÄ = HELCK W./WESTENDORF W., eds., 1975–1992, Lexikon der Ägyptologie, 7 vols., Wiesbaden.
- DE MEULENAERE H., 1967–68, Pyramidions d'Abydos: JEOL 20, 1–20.
- NIWIŃSKI A., 1995, La seconde trouvaille de Deir el-Bahari (Sarcophages), CGC, Cairo.
- 1989, Studies on the Illustrated Theban Funerary Papyri of the 11th and 10th Centuries B.C. (OBO 86), Freiburg Schweiz/Göttingen.
- PIANKOFF A., 1957, Mythological Papyri (Bollingen Series 40.3), New York.
- SADEK, A.-A. F. 1985, Contribution à l'étude de l'Amdouat (OBO 65), Freiburg Schweiz/Göttingen.
- SAUNERON S., 1989, Un traité d'ophiologie, Cairo.
- THE EPIGRAPHIC SURVEY, 1963. Medinet Habu VI. The Temple proper, Part 2 (OIP 86) Chicago.
- TT = Theban Tomb