


## THE SO CALLED STATUE OF NEHEBKAU. A COMPARATIVE STUDY.

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Snakes have been pictured in Egypt since the Predynastic period to the end of the Roman period, on different supports and with different shapes. The same assertion is also true about the snake-gods, which can be portrayed fully ophiomorphic or anthropomorphic and even with hybrid shapes. The iconography of the Egyptian goddess Renenutet, <sup>1</sup>, which includes all of those types, is representative for the snake-deities. It can be compared with the one of Nehebkau, another god she is linked with in the Coffin Texts.

One can find different kinds of representation regarding the snake-gods and goddesses. The first of them is the figuration of their profound nature: the **fully ophiomorphic** type (fig. 1)<sup>2</sup>. On the opposite, there is a **fully anthropomorphic** type. These two kinds of representations can be found regarding Renenutet, the first often showing her coiled up, as an uraeus, and the second either standing or sitting<sup>3</sup> (fig. 3).

The snake-goddesses are also represented with a **tail and a human torso**, like Meresger in the Deir el-Medina village<sup>4</sup>. This last representation is usual in the Ptolemaic Period for the goddess Thermuthis, which is the Egyptian goddess Renenutet, that the Greek called Ermuthis or Thermuthis, whether her name was preceded by the article *t3* or not<sup>5</sup>. In this period one can find a lot of terracottas portraying this deity carrying a cornucopia (fig. 2), in relation with her role as a harvest goddess making her in charge of fertility.

And finally, the most common representation for this deity is the **anthropomorphic with a snake-head** type, which often pictured the goddess nursing<sup>6</sup>. One of the most famous figuration of this type can be found in the tomb of Khaemhat (fig. 4).



Figure 1. Renenutet as a snake, from an offering scene in TT 38 (after Davies, 1963, pl. II).



Figure 2. Thermuthis, Fouquet's collection nr. 178 (after Perdrizet, 1921, pl. XV).

- 1 For an overview and a study of the different writings of the name of the deity, see Collombert 2005-2007, 21-32.
- 2 See also, among others, the stela BM EA 1055 or the star pattern in the tomb of Ramesses III (KV 11) (for this last one see the Theban Mapping Project website [http://www.thebanmappingproject.com/atlas/index\\_kv.asp](http://www.thebanmappingproject.com/atlas/index_kv.asp)). For a general presentation of the monuments in which Renenutet is pictured in such a shape, see Broekhuis, 1971, 11-31.
- 3 Broekhuis, 1971, pp. 35-8 and 46-7.
- 4 This type of representation is that of the well-known Qen stela, in the Musée d'Aquitaine, Bordeaux (inv. 8635). For Renenutet, see Broekhuis, 1971, 31-2.
- 5 See Bonnet, 1952, p. 803-4, s. u. "Thermuthis" and Corteggiani, 2007, 543, s. u. "Ermouthis" which returns to p. 467-9 s. u. "Renenoutet".
- 6 See Broekhuis, 1971, 43-5; and for example the statue Cairo JE 36912 (= SR 3/6391; see the IFAO database «Cachette Karnak»: <http://www.ifao.egnet.net/bases/cachette/?id=273>), or even in relief like in the tomb of Amenemhat (TT 48; Säve-Söderbergh, 1957, pl. XLII). For Renenutet snake-headed but not nursing, see for instance the statue Cairo JE 36645 (= CG 39142 = SR 3/5846; see Daressy, 1906, 282, and pl. LIV; <http://www.ifao.egnet.net/bases/cachette/?id=15>).



Figure 3. Renenutet presenting wheat, temple of Kom Ombo by the time of Domitian (after De Morgan, et al., 1895, p. 60, fig. 63).

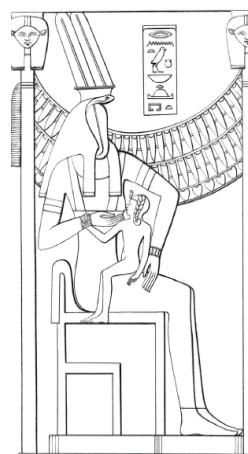


Figure 4. Renenutet nursing in the tomb of Khaemhat (TT 57; after Prisse d’Avennes, 1847, pl. XLII).

The snake-gods are often believed to be linked with the soil and were called *s3-t3*, “son of the earth”, by the Ancient Egyptian. Once more, such a connexion made them the guarantors of fertility and, hence, benevolent gods.

In the Coffin Texts Spell 762, Renenutet is introduced as the mother of Nehebkau<sup>7</sup>:

*H3 Wsjr N pn, twt Nhb-k3.w, s3 Gb, ms(w)-n mw.t=f Rnnwt.t.*

*O Osiris N, you are Nehebkau, son of Geb, born of your mother Renenutet.*

As we have seen, Renenutet is seen as a snake god, and Geb is connected, as an earth-god, with snakes<sup>8</sup>. Introduced as their son, Nehebkau is thus considered, by the Ancient Egyptians, as a snake-god, since the time of Pyramid Texts<sup>9</sup>. There is only a few representations known of this deity.

The first figuration of this god occurs in the chapter 125 of the Book of the Dead, in the list of the 42 assessors of Osiris, called the “negative confession”, or, better, the “declaration of innocence”. Here, the god is sometimes portrayed with a snake-head. Most of the time, papyri do not offer differentiated representations for the deities in this chapter, even if so, some of the versions keep the snake-nature of Nehebkau adding a specific determinative after his name (fig. 5d). A personal study of 23 different Book of the Dead led to the conclusion that Nehebkau is considered nearly as often as a snake that as an anthropoid, even if the majority of the representations is undifferentiated<sup>10</sup>.

7 CTVI, 392g-i [Sp 762].

8 See, for instance, his role in the myth of the heavenly cow (Guilhou, 1989, 11 and 113).

9 See among others occurrences *Pyr.* § 1146b [PT 510]: “he is Nehebkau multiple of coils”.

10 The god is pictured 14 times undifferentiated from the other deities, 5 times snake-headed and 4 times human-headed (see pNebeni = pBM EA 9900; pAnastasi = pBM EA 9905; pOuserhat = pBM EA 10009 + 9962; pAni = pBM EA 10470; pNakht = pBM EA 10471 & 10473; pNu = pBM EA 10477; pAmenhotep = pBM EA 10489; pPinedjem = pBM EA 10793; pNeferenpet = pBruxelles E5043 & Philadelphia E2775; pMaiherperi = pCG 24095; pAmenhotep = CG 40002 = JE 21369; pAmenhotep = CG 40003 = JE 95834 = SR 931; pSenhotep = pCG 40004 = JE 95652; pIouya = pCG 51189 = JE 95839; pQenna = pLeyde T2; pPaqerer = pLeyde T4; pAmonemouya = pBnF 36; pSoutymès = pBnF 42; pLouvre N 3073; pNeferounebef = pLouvre N3092 & Montpellier; pSenuseret = pVienne 10.994-10.997; tomb of Ramesses IV [KV 2] and tomb of Ramesses VI [KV 9]).

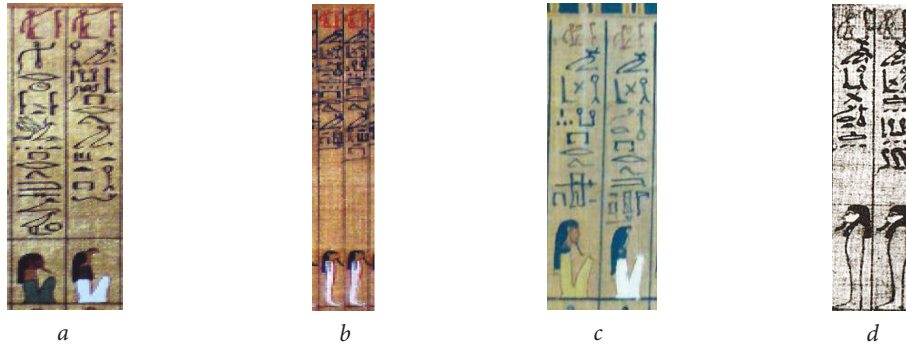


Figure 5. Detail of the BoD 125: **a** pAni (BM EA 10470, after Faulkner, 1998, pl. 31), **b** pNu (BM EA 10477, after Lapp, 1997, pl. 67), **c** pNakht (BM EA 10471 © Trustees of the British Museum<sup>11</sup>), **d** pNeferounebef, Louvre III 93 (= Louvre N3092, after, Ratié, 1968, pl. XVII).

The second figuration, can be found in the 4<sup>th</sup> Hour of the Amduat where Nehebkaui is in a fully ophiomorphic shape (fig. 6)<sup>12</sup>. One can wonder whether this specific figuration is the result of a naturalistic observation. As a matter of fact, in nature, two-headed snakes are not so rare (fig. 7)<sup>13</sup>. But, even if the Ancient Egyptians had a good sense of observation, this particular figuration is mainly due to the very nature of this god, of his duality. Since the Pyramid Texts, Nehebkaui is linked with the fate of the deceased since he provides him, once justified, with *kau*. His counterpart, Nehemkaui, is responsible for the negative outcome of the judgement. He takes the *kau* away from the deceased, causing him a second death. The concept of *kau*, documented since the 2<sup>nd</sup> Dynasty, seems to refer to both the funerary offering, the means of sustenance, and to the deceased who benefits, himself. Nehebkaui and Nehemkaui form together another type of afterlife judgement, different from the one in the Osirian court<sup>14</sup>:

*Jp=f jb.w, nḥm=f k3.w, nḥb=f k3.w.*  
*He will assess hearts, tear kau apart and tie kau* <sup>15</sup>.



Figure 6. Detail of the 4<sup>th</sup> Hour of the Amduat, Tomb of Thutmes III (KV 34, after Bucher, 1932, pl. IV).

Those two, the 4<sup>th</sup> hour of the Amduat and the BD 125, are the only known examples of Nehebkaui's iconography throughout the period in which the god is documented, that is to say between the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, in the Pyramid Texts, and the end of the Ptolemaic and Roman period, in the temples. Those two, quite rare, figurations of this god occurred both during the New Kingdom.

Another possible representation of this deity<sup>16</sup> could be a statue found in the location of the Ancient Heliopolis [pl. I], between May and June 1985, during an excavation campaign in Matariya. It is now located in the Matariya Open-air museum<sup>17</sup>. This is an anthropomorphic statue in red (silicified) sandstone of 143 cm height. The subject is portrayed seated on a throne,

11 After [http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/collection\\_object\\_details/collection\\_image\\_gallery.aspx?assetId=796954001&objectId=113076&partId=1](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details/collection_image_gallery.aspx?assetId=796954001&objectId=113076&partId=1).  
 12 This figuration can also be found in the determinatives of his name used in the Coffin Texts: CT II, 54b [Sp 87] (M6C); V, 130b [Sp 398] (M6C) and V, 143a [Sp 398] (M3C ; M4C ; M6C ; M21C).  
 13 G. Matz (2005, 106) indicates that at least 400 two-headed individuals were identified this day.  
 14 *Pyr.* § 161b [PT 218].  
 15 The translation adopted here is committed in preserving the pun present in the Ancient Egyptian language. For the meaning of *jp=fjb.w* see Willems, 1998, 719-44.  
 16 There is a whole series of amulets and statuettes identified with the god Nehebkaui, but they wear no inscriptions and it is not possible to assert this identification. Especially since the only statuette with a text refers to Heneb (see Limme, 1988, 23-4 [5]).  
 17 Ramadan, 1989, 51-61 and pl. 1-2; Moussa, 1994, 479-83; Abd el-Geil, Shaker and Raue, 1996, 138, n°17 and Raue, 1999, p. 357.



Figure 7. Two-headed snakes: *Natrix natrix* (left) and *Pituophis melanoleucus* (right) (after Matz, 2005, 106-7).

the hands stretched upon his knees, on top of a pleated kilt. The head is heavily damaged but we can see that he wears a wig and a false-beard. The upper half of the head is missing, as well as part of the legs; but the inscriptions on the side of the throne can still be read:

*N(y)-sw.t bjty usr-M3'.t-R' stp-n-R', s3 R', R'-mss(w)-sw mry-Jmn, [dw] 'nh mj R', (mr)y Nhb-k3.w hrj-jb Hw.t-3.t.*

*The King of Upper and Lower Egypt Ousimare Setepenre, son of Re, Ramesses Meriamun, given life as Re, beloved of Nehebkau who dwells in the Great Mansion.*

According to the text this statue is either a representation of Ramesses II or the god Nehebkau. Among the authors who have written on this topic, opinions are divided<sup>18</sup>. First of all, comparing the statues of Renenutet snake-headed<sup>19</sup> to the statue of Nehebkau, one can see that the last one was clearly human-headed. Thus, if it is a representation of the god, and not of the king, it is one of the rare anthropomorphic ones. Often the belt loop also carries, in a cartouche, the name of the pharaoh represented. Here, the same can be said, that for the spaces beside legs: it bears no trace of engraving and therefore no record of the name of Ramesses II.


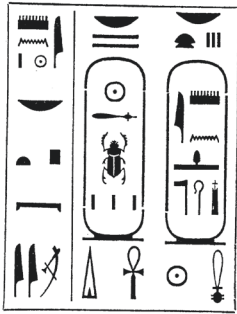
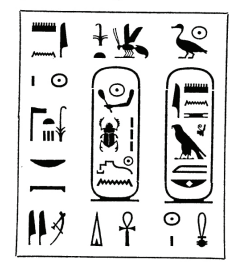

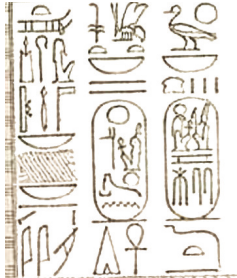
Others statues present the same type of texts and might shed some light on the nature of the subject pictured here. The table below shows the comparison of different elements from a few chosen monuments:

MUSEUM AND INVENTORY NUMBER	DESCRIPTION	INSCRIPTION
Cairo Museum CG 38068 = JE 11248 and 12650 (After Daressy, 1906, 25 and pl. VI).	Statue of Ptah-Tatenen walking donated by Amunhotep II. The god is crowned with two ostrich feathers and he has a beard.	
Cairo Museum CG 38429 = JE 30169 (After Daressy, 1906, 116 and pl. XXV).	Statue of Ptah donated by King Ramesses II. His body is contained in a shroud. He holds in his hands a sceptre made of the 'nh, w3s, dd signs.	

18 See for instance, Moussa, 1994, *contra* Ramadan, 1989, 55: "A red quartzite statue of King Ramses II".

19 Cairo JE 36645 (= CG 39142 = SR 3/5846; <http://www.ifao.egnet.net/bases/cachette/?id=15>) or Cairo JE 36912 (= SR 3/6391; see <http://www.ifao.egnet.net/bases/cachette/?id=273>), already quoted.



MUSEUM AND INVENTORY NUMBER	DESCRIPTION	INSCRIPTION
<p>Luxor Museum CG 42014 = JE 36928 = SR 3/9683 (After Legrain, 1906, 10-11 and pl. VIII; see <a href="http://www.ifao.egnet.net/bases/cachette/?id=134">http://www.ifao.egnet.net/bases/cachette/?id=134</a>)</p>	<p>Statue of King Amenemhat III walking. His hands are stretched upon his kilt.</p>	
<p>Cairo Museum CG 42078 = JE 37369 = SR 4/11533 (After Legrain, 1906, 45, pl. XLVIII; see <a href="http://www.ifao.egnet.net/bases/cachette/?id=378">http://www.ifao.egnet.net/bases/cachette/?id=378</a>).</p>	<p>Aries lying on a base protecting a statuette of Amunhotep II. The King is walking, his hands are stretched upon his kilt.</p>	
<p>Cairo Museum CG 42091 = JE 36583 = SR 1/3236 (After Legrain, 1906, 53-54 and pl. LVII; see <a href="http://www.ifao.egnet.net/bases/cachette/?id=4">http://www.ifao.egnet.net/bases/cachette/?id=4</a>).</p>	<p>Statue of King Tutankhamun usurped by Horemheb. The pharaoh is walking and his hands are stretched upon his kilt with a belt. In the belt loop, in shape of a cartouche, his name is inscribed.</p>	
<p>Cairo Museum CG 42093 = JE 36910 = SR 3/10117 (After Legrain, 1906, 54-5 and pl. LIX; see <a href="http://www.ifao.egnet.net/bases/cachette/?id=227">http://www.ifao.egnet.net/bases/cachette/?id=227</a>).</p>	<p>Seated statue of Amun or Ay. The statue is headless. The subject wears a pleated kilt and his left hand holds, what seems to be, an 'nh-cross.</p>	
<p>Alexandria After LD III, 142b (see KRI II, 486, 1-3).</p>	<p>Seated statue of King Ramesses II (cf. <i>infra</i>).</p>	

MUSEUM AND INVENTORY NUMBER	DESCRIPTION	INSCRIPTION
Jerusalem, Bible Lands Museum BLJM 1055 <sup>20</sup> .	Seated statue of King Ramesses II, headless. The texts on the right and left sides are different regarding the deity mentioned.	<p>Right side: <i>N(y)-sw.t bjty wsr-M3'.t-R' stp-n-R', s3 R', R'-mss(w)-sw mry-Jmn, d(w) 'nh mj R', mry Jmn- R' n(y)-sw.t ntr.w.</i></p> <p><i>The King of Upper and Lower Egypt Ousimare Setepenre, son of Re, Ramesses Meriamun, given life as Re, beloved of Amun-Re, King of gods, lord of heaven.</i></p> <p>Left side: <i>N(y)-sw.t bjty wsr-M3'.t-R' stp-n-R', s3 R', R'-mss(w)-sw mry-Jmn, d(w) 'nh mj R', mry Hw.t-Hr, nb.t Mdd.</i></p> <p><i>The King of Upper and Lower Egypt Ousimare Setepenre, son of Re, Ramesses Meriamun, given life as Re, beloved of Hathor, lady of Medjed<sup>21</sup>.</i></p>

Table 1. Presentation of different statues in which the same text as on the Matariya statue is inscribed.

First of all, we can see that the text on the statues is not sufficient evidence to determine the category of the subject represented: both god and king statues show this text.

According to the descriptions, the seated statues represent either gods or kings. The Alexandria monument is clearly portraying Ramesses II. It shows several signs helping to identify the subject embodied: he holds an *heqa*-scepter, under the throne one can find a representation of defeated enemies and, of course, his belt loop wears his name. Even though the statue is headless, his identification seems easy.

In the Karnak cachette, CG 42093<sup>22</sup>, there is another seated statue, headless, bearing the same inscription. This one is considered to be the representation of the King donated to the god, and not a portrait of the god himself. The subject wears an *ousekh* necklace, armbands on arms and wrists and a corset with suspenders. The text of this statue is similar to the one inscribed on the statue of Nehebkau, but there is the name of the pharaoh written beside the legs, accompanied with the epithet *ntr nfr* which is clearly a designation of the king<sup>23</sup>. The Matariya statue, though damaged, shows no trace of text beside the legs of the subject, suggesting that nothing was inscribed there, not even the names of Ramesses II, preceded by this epithet.

The closest parallel to the subject of our study is provided by the Jerusalem statue<sup>24</sup>. Here the subject is also portrayed seated on a throne and he wears a pleated kilt. The hands are damaged and could be stretched upon his knees, or holding an attribute. The statue is totally headless but the legs are better preserved than those of the statue of Nehebkau and it is clear that the spaces beside the legs show no sign of inscriptions. The only difference deals with the texts written on both sides of the throne, which are not the same regarding the deities mentioned (Amun-Ra and Hathor). Such a thing does not occur in any other statue studied here. The Jerusalem statue is identified with Ramesses II, certainly because of these inscriptions: it clearly figures a male, not a woman, hence it cannot be the representation of the goddess Hathor, and it is therefore the pharaoh that is portrayed here.

20 I want to thank here Carolyn Budow Ben-David for given me access to pictures and information regarding this statue for research.

21 For this toponym see Hannig, 2006, 2953 {41783}.

22 JE 36910 = SR 3/10117; <http://www.ifao.egnet.net/bases/cachette/?id=227>.

23 Tillier, 2011, 159 : "L'expression *ntr nfr* est plus connue pour qualifier un roi qu'un dieu".

24 BLMJ 1055.

In every case mentioned above, there is a decisive element that enables the identification of the represented subject. Yet, for the statue found in Matariya, none of these elements are present. Thus, the authors have identified alternately the statue with Ramesses II<sup>25</sup> or Nehebkau<sup>26</sup>. Both the identifications are plausible, the king and the god having their place in the great temple of Ra: Ramesses II is known to be a great builder and it is likely that he continued the work of his father regarding the city of Heliopolis and his temple; Nehebkau is known to have a particular relationship with the god Re-Atoum, the heliopolitan creator<sup>27</sup>.

The decisive evidence for the identification of the subject is provided once again by the text. Comparing the texts of the statue CG 38068 to the other monuments clearly portraying a king, one can see that the hieroglyphs are oriented in the same direction as the appointed representation. On the Ptah-Tatenen statue all the signs are curved from left to right, but in the case of the pharaohs statues dedicated to a god, the texts regarding the king and the god are faced up. Thus, as on the monument of Jerusalem, the figure depicted here is actually Ramesses II.

*Hry-jb hw.t-ʒ.t* is the usual designation regarding the relation of Nehebkau and this particular temple, even in the BD 125. But, in all the texts, there is only one mention of a “temple of Nehebkau” and it is not located in Heliopolis, but in Herakleopolis<sup>28</sup>:

*Jw sm3-n=j jtr.ty Šm3w jtr.ty Mhw, jtr.ty rsw mhw, m s.t tn hn' hw.t n(y).t Nhb-k3(.w).*

*I have restored the Dual Shrines of Upper Egypt, the Dual Shrines of Lower Egypt and the Dual Shrines of North and South in this place, as well as the temple of Nehebkau(u).*

Although there is no mention of a priesthood of this god, his festival enjoyed certain notoriety during the New Kingdom<sup>29</sup>, and it is odd that neither temple nor a priest is specifically associated with this event of which traces can be found throughout Egypt.

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The iconography, quite rare, of Nehebkau follows the main features of others snake-gods. The very damaged state of the statue found in Heliopolis makes it very difficult to assert the identification of the represented subject. Nevertheless, according to the text on the Matariya statue, there is no doubt that it was dedicated by Ramesses II to Nehebkau. A close study of the inscription also allows to postulate that the subject represented is actually Ramses II, not the god Nehebkau. The presence of this statue near the Great temple of Ra, also raises the problem of the cult of this deity, for whom the priesthood is not documented and no temple has yet been found.

25 Ramadan, 1989.

26 Moussa, 1994.

27 Shorter, 1935 and Massiera, 2013.

28 See Vercoutter, 1950, p. 88-89, pl. III.

29 On a total of 32 listed occurrences, 21 are from the New Kingdom.

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pl. I



*The statue found in Mataryia in 1985, with a focus on the (damaged) face © Magali Massiera.*

