

ISIS-THERMOUTHIS AND THE ANGUIFORM DEITIES IN EGYPT: A CULTURAL AND SEMANTIC EVOLUTION

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The snake, for its primeval power and chthonic life, has always had a central but ambivalent role, in Egypt as well as in the Ancient Near Eastern world. Here the semantic field of the serpent is mainly negative: just for example, the god Mot, the deification of the death, can also appear as a serpent;¹ the word *āl-mā-yuḏkar* “snake” in the semitic dialect of Sana means “the one who is not named” is a clear evidence of a linguistic taboo; and the Common Semitic word NAḤAŠ “snake” was related with the meaning “prophecy” and “exorcist formula”.²

From the reading of the Egyptian documents and representations on the tomb and temple’s walls it is clear that in Egypt the symbolic significance of the snake figure was intimately considered powerful and productive during all the Egyptian history. It was used to express different and wide meanings – political, religious, philosophical – because in Egypt the snake could be also seen, at the same time, as an evil and dangerous entity (Apophis above all), as a protective deity (the goddess Wadjet, for example): one can easily find in the Pyramid Texts a long list of serpents, as evil entity e.g. the *hpnwi*-snake, as protective entity, e.g. the *dnn*-serpent, a clear evidence of an interesting quantity of more ancient myths that merged in the Corpus of the Pyramid Texts. The example of the snake-god Nehebkaw is paradigmatic: in the Utterance 229 the god Atum pressing down on the vertebrae of this serpent have stilled the turmoil in Heliopolis; but in the utterance 510 the deceased king is identified with Nehebkaw.³ A double meaning that had been created, doubtless, by the natural relationship of the snake with the creative process, generating a continuous contradiction, for a modern point of view.

We can briefly remind that before the primeval mound some chthonic snakes were already created and they participated to the creative process, helping the demiurge (also represented in the shape of a snake). But after the creation they were excluded from the created world (and likely Apophis was one of them) and immediately destined to die; although they will have a particular future becoming fathers of the entire living creature and/or to be the first mummified beings.⁴

It appears clear that in Ancient Egypt the serpent cult continued to be an integral element of any fertility cult, until it became a fertility symbols both of the Mother-goddesses and Gods.

To underline this semantic characteristic the ancient Egyptian created different representations of the anguiform divinities, mainly in their hybrid shape.⁵

But immediately the symbolic world of the snake was included in the official and pharaonic cult. The goddess Wadjet was the right example to understand as in Egypt also an anguiform divinity (a cobra in this case) could be associated not only with the wilderness power but also the symbolic world of the king (or more simply the village’s chief). Starting from a totemic use in the Proto-Dynastic Period, when its cult was mainly worshipped at Buto, and likely related with the fertility cult, its name means “She (who belongs) to the papyrus”,⁶ the goddess Wadjet became one of the protector for the king and one of the symbols of Lower Egypt. Always in serpent form, she is

1 Leick 1991: 119.

2 Fronzaroli 1968: 285.

3 Cfr. Shorter 1935: 41-48.

4 Cfr. Meeks –Favard Meeks 1995: 29.

5 Creating in this way the divine level, by fusing the chaotic world of animals with that of men, because the hybrid element is peculiar Egyptian iconography, and emphasized the divine world, characterizing it since the Predynastic age, and throughout the course of Egyptian history, cfr. Franci 2013: 63-72.

6 For another interpretation see Shaw – Nicholson 1995: 302.

also represented in human (but not in hybrid) shape (usually with Nekhbet), and in leonine form; mostly in the Late Period during the most dynamic religious syncretism. This merging involves also the uraeus, called also *wrt-hq3w* “The Great enchantress” of whom we have a representation with the human head in the shrine of the king Tutankhamon. The main identification is with the protector of the king (and both are identified with the Eye of Ra).⁷ But beside this aspect more strong is the creative one. Another interesting case is represented by the inscription of the temple at Esna, where a group of texts from the Roman era investigates the primordial and creative nature of the goddess Neith, and describes the evolutionary process that accompanies self-consciousness of the creator from the immobility in the darkness to the emergence the earth and in the appearance of the light: in the creative process identifications is reflected in the nature of the goddess, and in her snake form, the same of the primordial being in the early stages of existence; as a being who is not born, but rather accompanies the creative act.⁸

The symbolic value of the snake in the semantic communication of the ancient Egyptian arrives to a more speculative and philosophical definition. For examples: in their cosmological myths the ancient Egyptians also expressed a very special concept: if the world had had a beginning then it could also have an end. And to the words of the god Atum describe this dramatic moment: “...*I will destroy everything that I have created. The earth will return to the Nun, to the water, as in the primordial age. I am the one who will remain with Osiris, I'll turn back into a snake, which is not known by men and is not seen by the gods*”. It is an extraordinary image that allows you to know what the original shape of the creator was: the snake. An outstanding representation also at the level of symbol encapsulating both the creative forces and the chaos, and once again confirms the double symbolic use of the snake: it is a snake who attempts to block the nocturnal trip of the sun. It's a snake in the depth of the cave from which comes the beneficial Nile flood, guiding the cycle of life, death and rebirth, the balance and time. And the demiurge is a snake.

The strength of this representation is so strong that towards the end of the fourth century CE an alexandrian Latin poet named Claudian in his work “On Stilicho's Consulship” wrote: “*Far away, all unknown, beyond the range of mortal minds, scarce to be approached by the gods, is a cavern of immense age, hoary mother of the years, her vast breast at once the cradle and the tomb of time. A serpent⁷ surrounds this cave, engulfing everything with slow but all-devouring jaws; never ceases the glint of his green scales. His mouth devours the back-bending tail as with silent movement he traces his own beginning*”. It represents the end of everything? No. And it is the same Atum to confirm this hypothesis. He will turn into a snake. What kind of snake? But the Ouroboros, the one that bites its tail, the snake around the world, the eternal regeneration: a new beginning.⁹

Of the same philosophical depth the snake called Metwy, who is a representation of the time, and in this mean he gives birth to the hours during the so called XIth hour in the Amduat, as is depicted in the tomb of Amenhotep II (XVIII Dynasty).

A reflection of this belief it is still alive in the *Hieroglyphika* of the Egyptian writer Horapollo of the fifth century CE, where we can read: “...*To denote Eternity they depict the SUN and MOON, because their elements are eternal. But when they would represent Eternity differently, they delineate a SERPENT with its tail covered by the rest of its body: the Egyptians call this Ouraius, which in the Greek language signifies Basilisk: And they place golden figures of it round the Gods. The Egyptians say that Eternity is represented by this animal; because of the three existing species of serpents, the others are mortal, but this alone is immortal; and because it destroys any other animal by merely breathing upon it even without biting. And hence, inasmuch as it thus appears to have power over life and death, they place it upon the head of the Gods* (Hieroglyphika I,1)”. In reality here the author confuses the uraeus with the Ouroboros that is described in the following paragraph: “*When they would represent the universe, they delineate a SERPENT bespeckled with variegated scales, devouring its own*

7 See Shaw – Nicholson 1995: 67.

8 Cfr. Ciampini 2014: 29 and ff.

9 On this see Meeks –Favard Meeks 1995: 34.

tail; by the scales intimating the stars in the universe. The animal is also extremely heavy, as is the earth, and extremely slippery, like the water: moreover, it every year puts off its old age with its skin, as in the universe the annual period effects a corresponding change, and becomes renovated. And the making use of its own body for food implies, that all things whatsoever, that are generated by divine providence in the world, undergo a corruption 1 into it again (Hieroglyphika I,2)". Horapollon here is spokesman of the "Western" tradition will choose the snake biting its tail as a magical, alchemical and hermetic symbol (i.e. the symbolism of Gnostic Ophites), of Egyptian origin, which undergoes a reinterpretation: one can find the scales as stars in Porphyry; and even the various naturalistic Greek writings.

The case of the goddess Mertseger is a good example of how a form of worship was able to become a feature of the cultural identity of an entire community: Deir el Medina. The goddess was considered the personification of the top of the hill, above the Theban necropolis and of its shrine. She protects the inhabitants of the village, judging their behavior ready to punish, but also to forgive, the sinners. During the time she was associated with the goddess Renenutet, and the goddess Hathor showing how the Egyptian divinities were intimately predisposed to the syncretism.¹⁰ Its iconography, hybrid, human or completely animal, without doubt was the most representative in the Egyptian context of the anguiform deities, giving another dowel in the evolution of their semantic field.

With the Persian's conquest before, Greek and Roman after, Egypt lost its centrality in the world. Its culture and languages disappeared, and its population became citizens of low level under foreign empires. Only its religion and philosophy, but called exoteric and magic, survived in the darkest side of the Western mind (alchemy, masonry, etc.).

Thus, the case of Renenutet/Isis-Thermouthis concludes, in some way, a millenarian tradition. *Renenutet* was already mentioned in the *Pyramid texts* and her cult was attested from the IV Dynasty, when we have noticed a priest of Renenutet called Mari (*mry*).¹¹ Her worship began a royal cult with the edification of her temple at Medinet Madi and the temple of Sobek in the capital town Shedet, under the king Amenemhat III.¹² From this moment Renenutet was a medium for the exaltation of the prosperity and power of the ruling king with Sobek, the main Fayoum divinity; further "*Renenutet, in her capacity of goddess of harvest, and Sobek, as lord of the whole Fayyum, are beneficent gods, who distribute goods and provisions for the king's table*".¹³ on a wall the king Amenemhat III is introduced into the sanctuary of Renenutet, called the *living one of Dja*.¹⁴ This relationship is very important because links the royal family (since the Old Kingdom) also to Renenutet worship, allowing us to suggest a different interpretation of the famous Statuette of Queen Ankhnes-meryre II and her son, the king Pepy II: it is not only the representation of a queen who was the regent during her son childhood; but probably the artist underlined her aspect of protector of the king in the same form of Renenutet.

Renenutet, associated with the agricultural world, called *Lady of the granary* whom the people make offering the 1st day of the harvest (Pakhons) threshing the wheat, was also related with the god Nepri: she was represented seated like a mother-goddess with a serpent head,¹⁵ suckling a child (maybe Nepri itself); or in other case with the head of serpent with a human body.¹⁶ This serpent-goddess fed, nursed,¹⁷ suckled, and brought up a child (in a statue of Cairo Museum the child was Horus) and she was connected with grain, harvest, food nursing, and, in a the tomb of two official of Thutmose IV also the vine was presented on her altar. For these reasons was called

10 On Mertseger see Bruyère 1930.

11 Leibovitch 1953: 105.

12 Cfr. Zecchi 2006: 119.

13 Cfr. Zecchi 2006: 123.

14 Leibovitch 1953: 110.

15 See for example the inscription of Amenhotep III, Sheick abd el Gurna, tomb no. 10.

16 Leibovitch 1953: 82.

17 The hypothesis which her name signified "the nurse" was wrong: it is clear the the original meaning was the great *nmwt*. *Nmwt* was a protective figure in a snake form (well represented in the Abydos temple of Sethos II).

the “Lady of the Provisions”. And under Ramesse IV her epithet was “*Who maintains everybody*”.¹⁸

The next step is represented by *Isis-Thermouthis*. She was syncretical representation in the Greek period of two different goddesses:¹⁹ Isis and the serpent goddess Renenutet, whose name was translated in Greek, passing by the Demotic transcription *T-Rmute*, Thermouthis; also written Hermouthis. We have seen Renenutet was a divinity linked with the agricultural world, associated with the vegetation but mainly with the fertility of the soil.²⁰ She was worshipped not only for providing crops but slowly, passing by a particular reading that associated her with *all the good and pure things* (to use an Egyptian formula), for being the bearer of the happiness.²¹ The first evidence of this syncretic figure was older: she was represented in a necklace of the king Tutankhamon with the epithet of Isis “The Great One in magic”.

During the Ptolemaic period the identification was completed,²² underlining her fertilising power. In this sense was paradigmatic the further assimilation with the Nile good Inundation²³: “*Hail to you good Isis-Ermouthis, with thy great name, magnificent, to all those who rejoice at thy feast day, thou givest gift, the young being accomplished at the month of Pekhous for welfare of everybody...and persuading the Nile in his golden course, thou raisest him on the land of Egypt for rejoin of all the men*”.²⁴

Isis-Thermouthis widespread characteristics grow up as we can read in the hymns of Isidore (II-I c. BCE), on the pillars of the Temple of Isis-Thermouthis (built by Ptolemy IX Soter II) at Medinet Madi in Fayum where was exalted the omnipotence and versatility of the goddess:²⁵ *O wealth-giving queen of the gods, lady Hermouthis, Almighty, Agathe Tyche, Isis of the great name, Highest Deo, inventor of all life. Because of you, heaven and the whole earth have their being; And the gusts of the winds and the sun its sweet light. By your power the channels of the Nile are filled, every one, in the late summer season, and the most turbulent water is poured On the whole land, so that produce may be unfailing*”;²⁶ or in the second Hymn “*Hail, Agathe Tyche, greatly renowned Isis, mightiest Hermouthis, in you every city rejoices. O discoverer of life and of crops wherein all mortals delight because of your blessings. All who pray to you to assist their commerce, prosper in their piety forever; And all who are bound by fate in the grip of mortal illness, if they pray to you, quickly attain your life. How truly the Agathos Daimon, mighty Sokonopis dwells as your temple-mate, that goodly bestower of wealth...*”, and clearly he underlined the “international” aspect of the goddess.²⁷

But the most important element in the Isidore hymns is the clear link between this goddess and the king Amenemhat III the builder of the temple of Renenutet at Medinet Madi (that was also dedicated to Sobek), creating an implied bond, and representing Isis-Thermouthis as the protector of the kind and his royal family: “*Who built this holy temple to greatest Hermouthis? What god remembered the all-holy place of the immortals? As a lofty Olympus he marked out the innermost sanctuary for highest Deo, Isis Thesmophorus, And for Anchoes the son and for the Agathos Daimon, Sokonopis, he devised a most just haven. They say that there came to be a divine king of Egypt, who appeared as the lord of the entire land, wealthy, pious, and with the greatest universal power, who had glory and virtue equal to the heavens... For he was not a mortal man, nor was born of a mortal ki[ng] but he was the offspring of a great, everlasting god Souchos, the all powerful, the great, great and greatest; he appeared as the king and the son of Agathos Daimon. Whatever was the name of this man? What king or prince established this? Or who among the Immortals? The one who raised him, Sesoösis, who has*

18 Leibovitch 1953: 113.

19 Against the concept of syncretism see Malaise 1999 : 1-6.

20 Aeliano De Natura Animalis 10, 31.

21 van den Broek 1996:134. In ancient Sardinia it was attested also as the protector of the sailors, cfr. Gavini 2008:213.

22 Cfr. Sfameni Gasparro 2006: 49.

23 Otherwise she was the goddess of the good crops the bearer of the necessary elements for the life; cfr. van den Broek 1996:134.

24 Leibovitch 1953: 109.

25 She is Demeter, Aphrodite, Rhea, Hestia among the Greeks; Cybele at Traci; Leto at Licii, Artemis or Astarte at the Syrians. The goddess is already the ‘ Unique ’, is the Myriònyma; cfr. Ensoli Vittozzi 1992:214-215.

26 For the translation of all the hymns see Moyer 2010.

27 Moyer 2010.

gone to the western heaven, gave him his beautiful name of the brilliant sun. But when the Egyptians translate the name of this man, they call him Porramanres, the great, the immortal.”

In this context important was also the anguiform representation of *Serapis*. It is well known in the imperial coin, starting from the age of Marcus Aurelius, as a mixed representation of the Agathodaimon: the Serapis head on the erected snake body riding on a horse;²⁸ but also in coarse plaster plaques.²⁹ It is a further evidence of the will, during the Roman period but always by the Greek culture, of unify the Greek (-Roman) and Egyptian worlds, once again using Serapis as a *medium* (not only in Egypt but also in Babylon, during the kingdom of Alexander), linking it to Agathodaimon. This identification lead to an evolution of its qualities: no a mere spirit related with the agricultural world, but protector of the city, and associated with his paredra Isis-Thermouthis, which is often represented, embodying the forces of male and female fertility.

28 Dunand 1969: 25.

29 Fraser 1992: 348-350.

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