

THE FANTASTIC CREATURES IN PREDYNASTIC EGYPT:
AN ESSAY ABOUT NEAR-EASTERN INFLUENCES

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This article investigates the presence of fantastic creatures in the Egyptian Predynastic records, their meaning and the Near-Eastern influences on the Egyptian iconography in this period. The Predynastic period (3900-2900 BC)¹ is at the basis of Egyptian history, therefore its analysis plays a fundamental role in order to understand future developments of the Egyptian thought.

The word “monster” derives from the Latin *monstrum* and according to our western culture tradition, it implies a moral component linked to the unknown and tending to identify awful entities. Therefore, it is more accurate to employ the German word *Mischwesen*² because in ancient times monsters were also conceived as spirits, demons, gods.

Firstly it is important to address the topic from an anthropological point of view: monsters are products of human minds and they have been existing since 30.000 years ago as chaos symbols, they are deformed creatures compared to reality, and it is impossible to include them in a taxonomy.³ A fantastic creature is a mixture of different parts of various animals forming a supernatural being, in which every part has its own value, and it is chosen for a particular reason. Every *Mischwesen* entails a study of the composition of its body, whose assembly work has to create a final harmonious figure; its meaning becomes part of the culture, this is the reason why a fantastic creature could be read and understood in different ages.

The anthropologist Lévi-Strauss observed that individuals create monsters putting together a frame of reality and elements of their own fantasy, this process is defined *reshuffled familiarity*.⁴ Monsters can be defined through what a community hold to be normal and acceptable; different times, different cultures and different places produce several different answers.⁵ Researchers should try to be detached from their background to understand the culture they are studying.⁶

In the Predynastic records twenty-one examples of fantastic creatures were found but in a narrow class of materials linked to elites and kings. All the objects found were luxury objects as ceremonial palettes, knives, amulets, figurines and head maces found in temple's deposits and tombs (some have no record of their origin). This is the reason why it can be argued that they are linked to a cultural or religious sphere. Palettes for example were used as votive gifts in temples or perhaps during the ceremonies. All palettes have some common iconographic elements: serpopards' necks cross forming cosmetic bowl, and the presence of lycaons in heraldry position. Lycaon is a sort of savage dog which was consequently tamed to have a protective function; the animal at issue is symbol of protection of the natural order.⁷

Fantastic creatures are blend with other savage animals such as ungulates, felines, antelopes in

1 Hendrickx 1999

2 Verderame 2013; Bellucci 2013; Reallexicon der Assyriologie (Wiggerman 1994)

3 Douglass 1966, 69-105

4 Lévi-Strauss 1962, 29-33

5 Canguilhem 1962, 21-26

6 Baglioni 2013, 24

7 Oliver and Desmond 2004, 48



Figure 1. Cosmetic animal palette OIM E11470 (Teeter 2011, 200, fig.53) Courtesy of Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago

particular, they dwell in the desert, which constitutes, at the same time, both the border of Egypt and the boundary between chaos and order. The first category concerns some hybrids composed of two ordinary animals and their meanings. For example, an illustrative Oriental Institute Museum Palette,¹⁰ represents a hybrid with bull head (horn are lost) and tilapia's fin (fig.1). The fish is symbol of fertility and renovated life and, joined together with the bull royal symbol, infuses the message of the renewal of king's power.¹¹

Other examples are two hybrids illustrated in Abu Zaidan Knife, one composed of a gazelle's body and tilapia's fins (fig.2) and the other one of a vulture's body and an elephant head; like the tilapia, the ibex is a symbol of rebirth, rejuvenation while the elephant and the vulture are linked to regality¹². The ibex/tilapia is represented also in a handle knife in Petrie Museum¹³ and in another very similar knife in Berlin.¹⁴ During the Predynastic period was very common joint together the characteristics of two animals with their own symbolic meaning to increase their symbolic power.

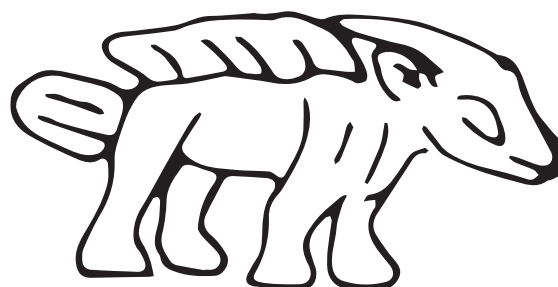


Figure 2. particular of row 7 in Abu Zaidan Knife (Huyge, 2004, 825, Churcher 1984)

In the votive deposit at Tell el-Farkha were found two unique hybrid figurines with a seal, a mace-head, a man statuette and woman holding her child statuette. A figurine represents a woman-headed snake, probably the first reference to the royal name *nebti*, and the other resemble a griffin with human hand holding a vase, probably an offer.¹⁵ Both context and the figurines suggest a bond with an early king, and it is clear that the monster is connected with his figure.

The griffin as serpopard is a hybrid originated in Egypt and influenced by Mesopotamian features, its first attestation evidence was in Elam during Susa II period.¹⁶ In Egypt its representation becomes fixed with hawk's head and forward legs, while the body and backward legs are those of a feline. It looks as if in the Predynastic period it embodied the meaning it will have in Pharaonic time. The hawk represents the king in Horus form, so if the head of the Sphinx coincides with those of the pharaoh it is likely that the head of griffin should be interpreted as the king's head. The animal is drawn in Predynastic records, ceremonial objects and in hunt scenes.

8 Whitehouse 2009, 29

9 Huyge 2004, 823-834

10 Teeter 2011, 200, fig.53

11 Hornung and Staehelin 1976, 110-111

12 Hornung and Staehelin 1976, 139-140

13 Smith 1992, 243, fig.37

14 Asselberghs 1961, Afb.51 and 52, pl.XXXVI; Huyge 2004, 826

15 Cialowicz 2011, 13-29

16 Teissier 1987, 32

It is depicted as destroyer linked to the war and helper of the sovereign against the enemies in Middle Kingdom; however it has an apotropaic function in magic wand.¹⁷ Furthermore, two knife-handles are decorated with fantastic creatures, represented together with other animals:



Figure 3. Knife-handle from Hierakonpolis (Quibell 1900, pl.XVI)

Gebel el-Tarif knife¹⁸ and tomb U-127 knife at Abydos.¹⁹ Probably, at the beginning of the Egyptian history, the griffin had an apotropaic meaning and it was linked to the king. Serpopard, on the other hand, appears as a creature with bad connotations, represented with a feline body, and a serpentine neck, often scaly.²⁰ The first testimony of this hybrid dates back to Uruk IV period from some seals found in Eanna and the similarities with the Egyptian examples are clear.²¹ The way the serpopard is represented in the Egyptian predynastic objects demonstrates that it was perceived as a wild and cruel monster which, however, could be tamed.²² An ivory fragment from the deposit of Hierakonpolis (fig.3) is decorated with the image of a serpopard fed by a human figure while another figure seems to feed or hold two monsters, which appear domesticated.²³ The Narmer Palette constitutes another proof that serpopards were conceived as animals easy to tame: it illustrates two serpopards intersecting their necks and forming a makeup bow, which are tied with a rope hold by two men. They are clearly able to control the animals, which are totally subdued.²⁴ Chronologically, the palette is the last one before the beginning of the Pharaonic period; it represents the peak of artistic and iconographic evolution and it is very similar to the following period. The Scorpion mace-head²⁵ dates back to the same period of the Palette in which Seth animal is portrayed, an Egyptian hybrid symbol of God Seth in the pharaonic history. It has long ears, a canine body, long snout, sharp-clawed paws and straight tail. Since it is hard to determine which part of animals it is composed of, scholars made various hypothesis.²⁶ According to Te Velde²⁷, in Pharaonic era the hieroglyph illustrating Seth animal was used as determinative for words such as disease, meteorological disturbance and so on. Therefore, Seth animal might be linked to chaos, confusion and death. However, in predynastic records the monster is represented above the banner on the Scorpion mace-head, a ceremonial object,²⁸ together with god Min's symbol and the divinity Khentamentiu. Therefore, with high

17 During the V dynasty Sahura at Abusir, and then Pepi II at Saqqara, is represented as a gryphon who killed his enemies (Hsu S. W., 2011, 50)

18 Asselberghs 1961, 276, pl.XXXIII, Afb.46

19 Dreyer 1999, 210, fig. pag.224

20 Kuhn 2011, 164-165

21 Redford 2001, 504-507; Khun 2001, 167

22 Khun 2011, 166-167

23 Probably a handle knife or sickle Boehemer 1974, 38, Abb.14; Adams 1974, 60, Quibell 1900, pl.XVIII

24 Franci 2013, 65

25 Whitehouse 2009,21-25

26 as oryx, donkey (Pleyte 1863, 187), pig (Newberry 1928, 217-219) and others animals (Maspero 1895, 103,108)

27 Te Velde 1977, 13-26

28 For further information Stevenson 2008



Figure 4. AN1895+.138 Figure of mythical animal possibly the god Seth, Naqada, grave 721. Image © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford (Cat. 177, Patch 2001, 196)

probability the hybrid was already conceived as a symbol of God Seth, without negative meanings. In support of this theory there are two other figurines representing Seth animal; one figurine was found in 721 tomb in Naqada²⁹ (fig.4) and the other one was in Petrie Museum but it got lost³⁰ (fig.5). Personally I think that both could be amulets.³¹ They have no tail, and the ears of the first figurine are lost, while, for the second, we have only a low definition picture;



Figure 5. Univ. Coll. P. 1
(Petrie W. F., 1914, pl. XXXVIII, n.218)

so it is hard to assess whether ears are missing or if the statuette was originally created without them. However the two figurines at issue are very similar to each other; in addition, their snouts have no beak, therefore I am agree with Payne³²'s thought, who identifies them as Seth animal.

In the bibliography it is possible to find several hypothesis about the meaning of creatures such as serpopard, griffin, Seth animal and other hybrids without a specific name. Some scholars³³ suppose that hybrid creatures are divine expressions and primitive representations of gods. In particular, Diane Patch affirms that, since ancient times, a connection between specific animals and determined gods existed, however, proofs are not available. She supports the concept of "humanization of power": at the beginning individuals felt to be threatened by animals, until they started to taming them. The creation of burials for animals is a clear signal of a turning point in the relation between men and animals.³⁴ Individuals acknowledge the power of animals and they begin to represent the king, the most powerful man, like on the Battlefield Palette³⁵, in which the king depicted as birds defeats his

29 Payne 1993,15, fig. 4, n.16

30 Petrie 1914, pl. XXXVIII, n.218

31 Cialowicz (2011) believe figurines are griffin, while Whitehouse (2009), Te Velde (1967) and Payne (1993) think are Seth animals

32 Payne 1993, 15

33 Patch 2011

34 Patch 2011, 85-90 and 200

35 Asselberghs 1963, 75-83

enemies. The next step of the process consists in human beings becoming aware of their capabilities and distancing themselves from animals; animals are perceived as a danger and become target of hunting. Individuals order the world according to their own interpretation, they are no more an instrument of unknown powers.³⁶ At this point divinities become anthropomorphic acquiring human or semi-human form. Coherently with this process, the representations of animals in Dynastic time are less numerous; this was probably a decision taken by the elite desiring an orderly world.³⁷ Also Frankfurt agrees that ancient Egyptians conceived animals as divinities, immutable and constant over time, contrary to men.³⁸ Other scholars³⁹ argue that monsters represent the collision between chaos and order, one of the fundamental concept in Egyptian religion. They are coherent constructions from a calculated thought to give meaning to Egyptian world vision. Hybrids are always drawn in a real context, the desert, the border between Egyptian order state and the chaos. Egyptians have the feeling of living in a world constantly threatened from chaos, since the act of creation have to reiterate continually. The divinities entrust the pharaoh with the task of preserving Maat on earth.⁴⁰

The objects I took into consideration in this article express the concept of control against chaos and fantastic creatures are part of it, in way or in another. For example, lycans seem to control chaotic elements when they are in heraldic position on palettes, or when they are hunting serpopards (Harkness palette,⁴¹ Hierakonpolis palette) or, finally, when they are drawn in knife handle where animals are represented in ordered rows. In this case, roses and hybrid animals have a function of “control” as well as they are symbols of the king in ceremonial and ritual objects. The griffin seems to have the same aim, along with an apotropaic function, while Seth animal and a cow with female face on Narmer Palette are linked to gods, respectively to Seth and Hathor. Serpopard is the only Mischwesen related to chaos, but practically controlled by man.

Egyptian iconography evolves during the Predynastic period; this phenomenon is deducible from the observation of the objects described above. The Narmer Palette and Scorpion King mace-head are exemplifying in this sense because they are decorated with the typical pharaonic manner of representation: the space is divided into registers and profile human figure portrayed with frontal torso. Both artefacts date back to the end of Predynastic period, clearly discerning themselves from previous periods. The development of iconography is simultaneous to the evolution of Egyptian thought, which, in turn, is conditioned by the formation of Egyptian state.

From the analyses of iconography in Predynastic records, it is possible to suppose that some fundamental ideas in Dynastic time already existed in a more unpolished form. The concept of Maat was born with religion, and it was expressed through the animals; the antithesis chaos-order, in its evolution, aimed to be an instrument to create cohesion during the stages of the state formation against its foreigner enemy.⁴² Some iconographic motives symbolizing the king disappeared as, for example, the tilapia-ibex. This kind of animals were substituted by the king directly represented defeating the enemies of the state.

Fantastic creatures in Near-East

The hybrids with Mesopotamian influences appear in Elamite and Mesopotamian glyptic during Uruk (3500-3000 BC) and Jemdet Nasr (3100-2900 BC)⁴³ period. The majority of stamp seals

36 Hornung 1983, 100-105

37 Baines 1993, 63-64

38 Frankfort 1991, 7-13

39 Cialowicz 1991, 61-64; Kemp 2006, 46-50

40 Vernus and Yoyette 2005, 632-652

41 Fischer 1958, 64-68, fig.20; Oliver and Desmond 1999, fig.77

42 De Wit 2001, 202-203

43 Milano 2012, 60

and seals⁴⁴ with hybrids were found near temples, so it can be deduced there was a connection between religion and the elite class.⁴⁵ The process of monster creation in Mesopotamia is the same: creatures are produced by using specific parts of selected animals, chosen for their “superhuman” characteristics. Mesopotamian hybrids seem to be composed with parts of three ordinary animals: lion, serpent and eagle. The lion is linked to the figure of warrior king, because it is strong and it provokes fear. The eagle symbolizes rebirth and earth fecundity, and the snake has

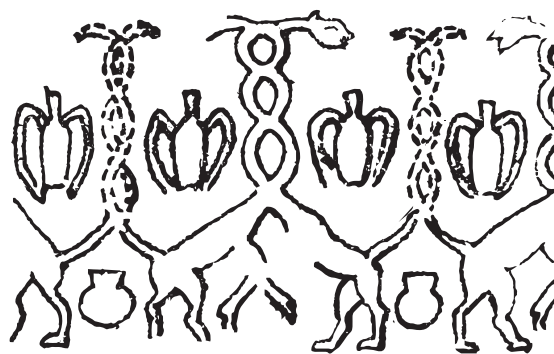


Figure 6: seal stamp, Warka, Eanna IV (Le Breton 1957, fig.20 (10), 105)

a bond with chthonian and subterranean world and evil forces. All together they formed the lion-head eagle, the griffin and a feline with serpent neck. As for the first figure, it is already fixed in its parts, while the feline with serpent neck varies: it is illustrated with a snake head, or with feline head, which can be placed also at the end of the tail; griffin also has variations.⁴⁶ The “serpopard” is always represented in pair with another one intersecting their necks (fig.6): it has pacific attitude. All these animals might be part of ritual or offering scenes.⁴⁷ In III millennium BC, the power of the lion-head eagle named Anzu or Imdugud⁴⁸ was linked to atmospheric phenomena, in particular to the storm. It is aggressive with others animals as metaphor of supremacy on natural forces and, for this reason, it is associated to the sovereign and it is drawn while attacking enemies.

The griffin seems to have different functions: it is represented as guardian, while it attacks men or animals and in hunting scenes. Some scholars associate it with Nergal⁴⁹ or Adad,⁵⁰ however, during the Uruk period it has not a fixed representation. Moreover, a lot of other indefinite creatures, anthropomorphic or animal figures with more than one head, are existing.⁵¹

The meaning of Mesopotamian monsters in this primitive age is unknown, however, subsequent researches suggested to academics⁵² the monsters at issue could be zoomorphic manifestation of gods with apotropaic function. Certainly, Mesopotamian population believed that monsters were superior beings linked to supernatural word.⁵³

How did Mesopotamian monsters make the scene on Egyptian Predynastic objects?

Egypt was in contact with the Levant from late Chalcolithic period and Ancient Bronze I;⁵⁴ this area was simultaneously subjected to the influence of Mesopotamia, where Uruk culture spread from the south of the country. Consequently, the contact between Egypt and Mesopotamia occurred indirectly addressed by the Levantine zone. Trades⁵⁵ between Egypt and Levant are testified by pottery,⁵⁶ alabaster vases, seals, weapons, and Near-East techniques in lithic industry in Delta's site; the influence was mutual.⁵⁷ Along with monsters, other Mesopotamian elements are present in Egypt: the typology of

44 For more information on Uruk seals Amiet 1980, 47

45 Rova 1994, 155-156

46 Rova 2002, 14-24

47 Frankfort 1939, 20

48 The name is discuss by Landsber (1961) who read anzu(-d), Lambert (2016) im.dugud, Alster (1991) An.im. dugud mušen

49 Porada 1948, 44

50 Bisi 1965, 64-65

51 For example: Amiet 1980, n.425,pl.26; Amiet 1972, vol.II, n.582, pl.12

52 Wiggerman 1994, 225-227; Winkelman 2008, 43-44

53 Gane 2012, 228-229

54 Amiran 1970, 85-89

55 De Miroschedji 2002, 43-44

56 Braun 2014, 41; De Miroschedij and Sadek 2005, 160-165

57 Watrim 2007, 1-28

Reserved Slip Decoration pottery and one with triangular tenons,⁵⁸ stamp and cylindrical seals and lapis lazuli. Several scholars argue that contacts took place through the Red Sea because Egypt imported obsidian from Ethiopia; this seems to be the reason why Mesopotamian influence did not reach Syrian coasts. A recent study proves that obsidian from Delta is originally from Anatolian volcanos, while Naqadian records come from Ethiopia,⁵⁹ and there is no evidence of such an early contact between Mesopotamia and Dilum or Magan.⁶⁰ Therefore, Mesopotamian influence does not derive from Persian Gulf. The most likely hypothesis is that the records of trade between the Levant and Syria have not been found yet or that the traded goods were perishable and hard to record.⁶¹

Conclusion

Fantastic creatures and other iconographic motives come in Egypt spread by seals. The first seal appeared in Abydos cemetery during Naqada II. In Naqada II iconographic motives on seals were assimilated and re-elaborated by the local culture and in at the beginning of Naqada IIIa they acquired only Egyptian features. The seal was linked to Mesopotamian elite class and Egyptians understood that, the iconographic motives used on seals to adorn tombs and objects was a direct link to the power, as argued by this article. At the same time local hybrids already existed and had their own meaning, which was transposed on foreign imported goods.

As to monsters, Egyptians copied griffin and serpopard reworking them morphologically and symbolically. Serpopard in Egypt has fixed physical features and its meaning is completely different from its Mesopotamian counterpart: the latter is symbol of fertility, while the Egyptian one represents a chaotic element to be tamed by humans. Griffin maintains similar features in both areas but its role in Mesopotamia is not fixed, while in Egypt it is linked to the king and it has an apotropaic function. In Egyptian iconography other motives are filtered and it is possible to trace their path in the Near-East, in Syria and the Levant. An example of what explained above is the motive composed by one or more than one animal on snakes⁶² found on seals in Mesopotamia, Syria and in Egypt on Carvarvon knife-handle (fig.7). Unluckily, the same study is not possible for

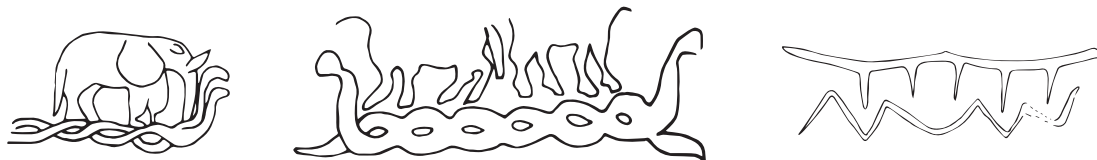


Figure 7: seal from Warka, Uruk IV; Syrian seal EB II; Egyptian motive on different objects (Teissier 1987, 34-35, fig.4)

monsters, because there are no traces except for the griffin, which was found in Syria.⁶³

In conclusion, indirect contacts between Egypt and Mesopotamia, characterized by the commercial mediation of Syria and the Levant, lead to a partial iconographic influence: only on a figurative level. The long distance trade system, at its first stages, is the main cause of the lack of direct contact between the two areas and consequently the lack of transposition of the original meaning of Mesopotamian objects. Egypt culture had its own iconographic repertoire and the indirect contact with Mesopotamia inspired Egyptian culture with new ideas. Egyptians selected some Mesopotamian motives reinterpreting them; they chose two fantastic creatures and others motives which were adapted at their thought. The monsters at issue were modified to coincide with the Egyptian symbolic meaning system and to be more easily integrated in their iconographic apparatus.

58 Guyot 2004, 81

59 Bavay et al., 2000

60 Read 1987, 326-327; Crawford 1998, 4-5

61 Guyot 2004, 81-85

62 Teisser 1987

63 For example Amiet 1980, fig.1647, fig.1649; Rova 1994, fig.59

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