

## EGYPTIAN HIEROGLYPHS AS SIGNS, SYMBOLS AND GODS

by

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In an Egyptian hieroglyphic text from the third millennium B.C. one can read: He is one who fashions his gods in writing that does not rub off (Petrie: 1892, Pl. 24). It is generally accepted and the context makes it clear that with the signs that are to be read as *nfrw* and that are to be translated as 'gods' the hieroglyphs are meant. The conclusion seems to be clear and unavoidable: Egyptian hieroglyphs are gods according to the Egyptians. But a historian of religion, even if he knows next to nothing of ancient Egypt and its hieroglyphs, might feel some doubt: Could it be true that scribal signs are gods? There are indeed problems. In the first place: This text that seems to identify gods and hieroglyphs is unique. There are, as far as I know, no parallels in which hieroglyphs are simply called gods. The closest parallels are the many texts in which language written in hieroglyphic script, as distinct from hieratic or demotic script, is called 'words of the god' or 'divine words' (*mdw ntr*). A very well-known epithet of the god Thoth, the scribe among the Egyptian gods, is 'lord of the divine words.' But it is hardly possible to decide what is precisely divine, the language or the script, if one should make that distinction at all. Another problem is, if this unique Egyptian designation is not simply a shortening or even a scribal error for 'words of the god,' what is meant by the Egyptian word 'gods.' Because the answer to this question is of course not so simple I will return to it later, be it very briefly, after I have discussed Egyptian hieroglyphs as signs and symbols.

A discussion of Egyptian hieroglyphs as signs and symbols might seem to be wrong from the start. Should it not be signs or symbols? In Van Dale's Great Dictionary of the Dutch Language hieroglyphs are defined as signs of a pictorial script, especially of that of the ancient Egyptians and secondly and figuratively as enigmatic, unreadable script. One is inclined to comment: We now know better as far as Egyptian hieroglyphs are concerned. Egyptian hieroglyphs are not unreadable any more since the decipherment of the hieroglyphs by Champollion in 1882. Egyptian hieroglyphs are elements of a system of writing ancient Egyptian language. Before Champollion there was, in European tradition, the myth of Egypt and its hieroglyphs, to use the title of the excellent book of the Danish Egyptologist Erik Iversen. From the end of ancient Egyptian civilisation until the age of enlightenment the neoplatonic view prevailed that Egyptian hieroglyphs were symbols of hidden wisdom.


It was the opinion from Plotinus to Athanasius Kircher and many others in European history that the Egyptians, either by exact science or spontaneously, had arrived at a method by which they could write with distinct pictures of material objects instead of ordinary letters expressing sounds and forming words and phrases. These pictures were


not merely ordinary images of the things they represented, but were endowed with certain symbolic qualities or *sophia* by means of which they revealed to the initiated contemplator a profound insight into the very essence and substance of things and an intuitive understanding of their transcendental origin, an insight which was not the result of reasoning or mental reflection but was acquired spontaneously by means of divine inspiration and illumination. As artistic representations of the phenomenal objects they revealed, in fact, the ideal world of the soul (Iversen: 1961, 45 f.).

But Champollion and the egyptologists after him were products of what is called the enlightenment. With their 19th century approach of more positive science they demythologized the myth of Egypt and its hieroglyphs. It seems to be easy to draw a conclusion from the foregoing: Hieroglyphs are, according to at least one ancient Egyptian text, gods and, according to the European neo-platonists, symbols and according to the egyptologists, signs. The situation, however, is more complicated. The hieroglyphic writing-system is at the same time pictorial, phonetic and symbolic. A symbol is a sign that conveys an image which in this reality and using the means of this our reality gives expression to another invisible order that is believed to be real (cf. Van Baaren and Leertouwer: 1980, 199). Of course I am aware of the problems involved in giving any definition whatsoever, but that should not prevent us from trying to explain what we mean by circumscription as soon as we use technical terms.






The Egyptian language was written with about 700 different signs (cf. the sign list in Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar*) or, if one should include the complicated hieroglyphic script of the Ptolemaic and Roman times, with some 7000 signs (cf. *Catalogue de la fonte hiéroglyphique de l'imprimerie de l'IFAO*). A hieroglyph is in origin a pictorial sign that indicates a reality in the world of the Egyptians and that was denoted by a special word in their language. Usually we distinguish in hieroglyphic writing ideograms or sense-signs, phonograms or sound-signs and determinatives or categorial signs. Some signs are only used as ideograms, others only as phonograms and a relatively small number of hieroglyphs served as determinatives. A hieroglyph could be used in turn as ideogram, phonogram and determinative, but that is relatively seldom the case, though double values often occur. Determinatives cannot be transcribed in roman letters and have no sound-value. They are written at the end of a word, following one or more other hieroglyphs. Determinatives categorize or classify a word. They are a rich and still too much neglected field of study especially if it is true that a culture is in reality the sum of its classifications, the way in which it classifies its material, social and spiritual universe (as anthropologists have argued). Ideograms indicate realities in the world of the Egyptians, be it a house, a lasso, a lion or a god. Because these realities in the environment of the Egyptians were designated in their language with specific words or sounds, the sense-signs conveyed also a sound-value. The Egyptians applied in their script largely the principle of what we would call the rebus or charade. Ideograms were thus used not to denote the realities themselves in the world of the Egyptians that they depicted, but to indicate certain entirely different realities, the names of which happened to have a similar consonantal sound. Only the consonants, not the vocals of the Egyptian words were indicated by the hieroglyphs, as is done in some Semitic scripts, probably under influence of the ancient Egyptian script. So it was possible for the Egyptians to express sounds, words and phrases i.e. language in their writing.

The hieroglyphic system is a practical script, but it is also a pictorial reproduction of the reality of the world of the Egyptians in some 700 images. It was not a completely closed and rigid writing-system. In the course of the millennia of Egyptian history some hieroglyphs underwent changes or fell into oblivion and new hieroglyphs were added e.g. when the horse and the chariot came into the world of the Egyptians. 700 pictorial signs are of course not a complete, but a selective depiction of reality. In a certain way not only the determinatives, but the hieroglyphs as such classify and categorize reality. They show what was significant to the Egyptians and what was not.

To give an example: The hieroglyph spitting mouth  serves as a determinative of the verbs to spit, spew, vomit, etc. and sometimes of the noun blood. Vomiting, spitting and spittle was not unimportant in Egyptian myth and ritual and it was an accepted element of culture, as is shown in Egyptian art: Wellknown is the vomiting lady in banquet-scenes. But we know from textual evidence that at least in a certain period of Egyptian history spittoons were used. The spittoon, however, is not a hieroglyph. At least none of the many pots and vessels of the hieroglyphs is recognized up till now as such. Maybe the spittoon was a novelty and a temporary phenomenon in Egyptian history as it was in European history. Anyway the spittoon does not seem to have been so important that it had to be promoted to the rank of hieroglyph. But spitting and vomiting could be done. It was a hieroglyphic act, like many other natural acts, that were accepted in Egyptian culture and stylized into hieroglyphs.

Hieroglyphs are expressions of the world-view of the Egyptians and they stylize or even sanctify the Egyptian way of life. Hieroglyphic writing is indeed an offshoot of Egyptian art, but the style of Egyptian art is also hieroglyphic. Egyptian art and hieroglyphs are connected with each other and express the Egyptian world-view. This means also that hieroglyphs are not free from ideology. When Christianity came into Egypt, the Bible was translated into the native Egyptian language, into Coptic. But the text of the Bible translated into the native language was written in Greek letters together with seven signs derived from the demotic script, but not in the hieroglyphic writing-system or its derivatives, the hieratic or demotic writing-system. Obviously these native Egyptian scripts were not felt to be free from ideology, but to be bearers of a specific Egyptian, heathen, world-view. One could venture to say that Egyptian hieroglyphs are already symbols insofar as these pictorial signs express the Egyptian world-view. It is well known that Egyptian art, including the hieroglyphic system, does not depict an object in the perspective as man sees it, but as it is believed to be in reality. The hieroglyphic image of a lion  is not just a casual individual lion as somebody might have seen somewhere in the desert. It is the archetypical, ideal lion.

Symbolic qualities of the hieroglyphic writing-signs become apparent especially in those hieroglyphs that were used as amulets, i.e. small and light objects to be worn on the body as instruments with protective and apotropaic significance, providing to the bearer with health and other good things or as scapegoats receiving evil from the sufferer (Klasens: 1975, 232). Hundreds of different kinds of amulets are known from ancient Egypt. Many of them are images of gods and goddesses that can be read as three-dimensional ideograms. Actually monumental hieroglyphs on stone are often three-dimensional. Their different depth or height is regrettably lost even in the most careful reproductions of hieroglyphic texts in modern books. Many amulets are sacred objects



that cannot be read, but several of them are just materialisation of hieroglyphs in faience or other materials. It would lead us too far to provide here a complete list of all the hieroglyphs of the 700 writing-sings that are used as amulets. Some examples may suffice:  ('*nh*');  (*w/s*);  (*dd*);  (*w/d*);  (*w/d/t*). Their transcription in roman letters with the traditional diacritic signs is here given to show that they can be read as common writing-signs. These and other hieroglyphic amulets are often found as elements in Egyptian jewellery.

The '*nh*'-signs seems to be a covering of the genitals or penis-sheath (Baines: 1975, 1-25) and is to be translated as 'life,' *w/s* and *w/d* are scepters in the hand of gods and goddesses and are to be translated as 'dominion' and 'freshness' or 'greenness.' The material of the *w/s*-scepter seems to be wood and that of the *w/d*-scepter papyrus. It is not completely certain what the *dd*-sign is. It is usually interpreted as a column. I suggest, that it is a combination of the four pillars of heaven. *Dd* is to be translated as 'stability.' *W/d/t* is the sound uninjured eye of Horus and plays a prominent role in Egyptian myths. It is to be translated as 'soundness, haleness.' Where these signs are written, where these amulets are worn, life, dominion, freshness, stability and soundness are made present. They are the symbols or 'divine words' of another order expressed in this our world and are as such amulets which give protection and regeneration. Sometimes '*nh*, *w/s* and *dd*' may be combined. In an Egyptian text '*nh*' is said to be the god Shu in his form, *w/s* the goddess Tefnut in her image and *dd* the body of Osiris. In a comparable text it is even said that '*nh*' and *w/s* are the father and mother of *dd*, suggesting that they are living beings i.e. gods (Winter: 1968, 77). These hieroglyphs are indeed sometimes depicted as living beings, with hands, eyes, etc. The ritual of opening the mouth gave symbolical life to objects. Statues, mummies, but also amulets and even temples and reliefs with figures and hieroglyphs were ritually given life. During the consecration of a temple the necessary ritual was performed on every figure and inscription, and repeated annually (Aldred: 1975, 793-795). In this way symbols became gods. The meaning of the Egyptian word for 'god' includes god revealed in symbols but also the symbols that reveal the god, as I have stressed before (Te Velde: 1982, 136). In this wide sense of the Egyptian word for 'god,' animals, statues and also hieroglyphs may be recognized as gods.

That hieroglyphs were considered as symbols and not just as neutral writing-signs can be shown also in another way: A special treatment was sometimes given to hieroglyphic texts written on coffins and in royal burial-chambers of the Old Kingdom and later. Figures of gods, men and animals i.e. figures of living beings were eliminated or truncated. I know of no Egyptian text in which the Egyptians themselves explain why they did this. The egyptologist Lacau after having given 64 pages with examples concludes: Les images sont des êtres vivants doués d'un pouvoir magique. Certains signes qui représentent des être dangereux ou impurs peuvent donc nuire au mort. Inversement le contact du mort peut profaner les images des dieux (Lacau: 1914, 64). Here, as often, the expression 'magical power' is not an explanation, but only a label. One hesitates also to acknowledge, grosso modo, that images are indeed living beings. Statues and images as such are not living beings. They can be given symbolic life in the ritual of opening the mouth. It is difficult to see that the image of a bird such as a duck would be so obnoxious to the dead that it had to be truncated or mutilated. Recently, however, it has been suggested that the hieroglyphs of living beings were deprived of their feet so that

they could not walk away and could not confuse the spells for the dead or regroup themselves into dangerous words and phrases (Kaplony: 1972, 10). In a later publication, again with very much material, Lacau (1926, 69ff.) stresses the fact that the suppression and mutilation of signs is only found on the coffins and in the burial chambers, but not in the superstructure of the tombs that were accessible to the living.

Perhaps the writing of the hieroglyphs in the immediate surroundings of the deceased, i.e. in the world of the dead, should be, symbolically, in accordance with the state of the deceased. Hieroglyphs of living beings were suppressed or dismembered in such a way that they did not represent life. It must be added that burial-chambers were often left undecorated, but sometimes texts, normally written, and vivid pictures of the life in the hereafter were given in them. The Egyptian designation 'lord of life' for a sarcophagus also suggests another way of thinking than that of those scribes who deliberately suppressed or mutilated hieroglyphs of living beings on coffins and in burial-chambers. General conclusions can hardly be made here.

To give another example of suppression: The name of the god Seth is written in the oldest pyramid in which texts are written, in the pyramid of Wenis, always with the hieroglyph of his specific animal, called the Seth-animal  by egyptologists for want of a better name. In the later pyramids this hieroglyph is always suppressed and the name of the god Seth is written with phonograms. Obviously the scribes of Pyramid Texts written after the time of Wenis realized that they should not evoke and glorify the presence of this god Seth (who according to the myth had murdered Osiris) with his animal, sound and alive. In the last millennium B.C. when Seth was no longer venerated as a god but was despised and feared as a demon, his name was written again with his animal, but it was provided with the ears of the lustful ass and a knife was struck in its head or body, so that the scribes ridiculed and 'killed' its symbol . A closer inspection into this hieroglyph of the Seth-animal, its significance and background, might be interesting, because it can serve as a practical demonstration of the fact that a hieroglyph can be sign, symbol and god. Here I partly summarise earlier studies (Te Velde: 1967, esp. 13-27; 1968, 37-40; 1980, 25-27; 1984) in which details with reference to texts, iconographic material and literature may be found.

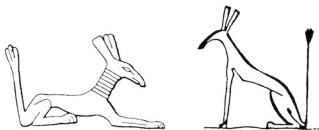


Fig. 1

At first glance the Seth-animal looks like a kind of dog. Typical is the long curved snout and the truncated ears such as no wild animal seems to possess. Also remarkable is the tail which is mostly raised when the animal is setting or lying down. The animal can be depicted in the script as lying down, sitting or standing.

Many scholars have attempted to determine the zoological identity of the animal and many different hypotheses have been brought forward in the history of egyptology. It has been connected with the greyhound, the ass, a kind of hog or boar, the oryx antelope, the jackal, the fennec, the hare and many other animals. When the okapi was discovered in Africa some thought that there might be some advantage in identifying the enigmatic Seth-animal might with it, but this hypothesis was also convincingly rejected. Since Champollion there have always been supporters of the theory that the Seth-animal represented a fabulous animal comparable with the griffin.



Fig. 2

It was found depicted together with fantastic animals of the desert, but this does not imply that the Egyptians did not believe in its reality. It seems that they supposed that it lived as a wild animal far from their own world in the desert, that it did not belong to ordered culture, but to chaotic nature. Sometimes the animal is designated as sha (šf), but we are not certain at all whether this designation was its name. The pig and the mythical devourer in the scenes of the judgement of the dead are sometimes also called sha or shayt. Their depictions, however, are quite different from that of the Seth-animal. There is a word sha that means 'destiny,' but it cannot be established with certainty that the Seth-animal was considered to be a beast of destiny. The only safe conclusion is that the Seth-animal was a fabulous animal of the desert.



From the beginning of Egyptian history the image of the Seth-animal is used as an ideogram to write the name of the god Seth. Seth has an outstanding role in Egyptian mythology as the enemy and friend of Horus and as the murderer of Osiris. As such he is the god of confusion who disturbs the order. But since limited disorder was accepted as essential to a living order, Seth was accepted and venerated as a god with whom one had to come to terms. Seth is also famous in a third and more positive mythological role as repelling Apophis, the monster of chaos. He is imagined in texts and depictions as standing on the prow of the barque of the Sungod and conquering that dangerous monster by word or deed. In primitive cultures the figure of the 'trickster'—as this Egyptian god of confusion may be called—is sometimes also slayer-of-the-monster. In his fight with Apophis Seth rather braggingly reveals himself with the words 'I am Seth, the originator of confusion, who thunders in the horizon of heaven.' But in Egypt that is irrigated by the Nile, thunderstorms are a rather superfluous phenomenon in contrast with other Near-Eastern countries. Seth, who causes commotion, is the opposite of the ideal of the Egyptian gentleman, the *ger ma-a*, the truly modest or silent man characterized by self-control. In the course of Egyptian history Seth proves to be lord of foreign

countries. Ash of the Libyans, Baal of the western Semites, Teshub of the Hittites, were considered as forms of Seth and their names in hieroglyphic script were determined with the Seth-animal, whereas identifications of Seth with typical Egyptian gods are rare. As is apparent from the disorders between Horus and Seth with sometimes drastic pederastic details, Seth is not considered as a typical sedate family god with female consort and divine child. His marriage with Nephthys does not include a child and remains a rather formal affair. Usually Seth is not considered to be the father of Anubis, the child of Nephthys. However, Seth, whose exuberant sexual activities are so well-known that he may be invoked in love-charms and whose testicles are a religious symbol as a pendant of the eye of Horus, incidentally has connections with other goddesses, Hathor, Neith and especially the foreign goddesses Anat and Astarte.

Seth may be represented in animal form, but also in human form, often with the head of the Seth-animal. He may wear a royal crown, mostly the double crown of Upper and Lower Egypt because he is together with Horus lord of the two lands. The bipartition of the world between these two lords could be worked out in such a way that Horus was not only lord of Lower Egypt, but also of the home-country, and Seth was not lord of Upper Egypt but of foreign countries and the desert. As such he may also be represented as a foreigner in exotic costume or as a Semitic Baal.

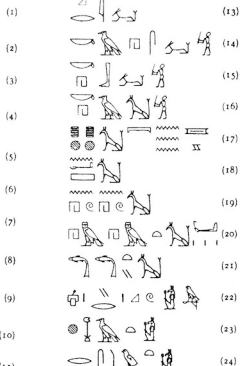
In Egypt temples of Seth lay on the border of the desert and places where caravan routes began. He was also venerated in the oases. But this frontier-god and rather disorderly foreigner became a god of state and court when the ramessidic pharaohs had their residence in Piramesse in the North-Eastern Delta. Ramessidic pharaohs even took their name from him: Sethos and Sethnakht. It is interesting to note that the special reputation of Seth in mythology and his reputed disorderly character have not prevented Egyptians, at least some of them, from accepting him unrestrictedly as their god. Personal names show that some did not hesitate to ascribe to Seth the same qualities that others assigned to other gods: 'Seth-is-great,' 'Seth-is-kind,' 'Seth-gives-salvation,' 'Seth-causes-to live,' etc. The cult of Seth declined in the first millennium B.C. The turning from veneration to demonisation occurred about 700 B.C., if a date should be given. Hatred against foreigners combined with the growing importance of the cult of Osiris caused a growing disinterest and even persecution of Seth as the enemy of the gods.

This should be sufficient background information on the hieroglyph of the Seth-animal as an ideogram. The sign is never used as a phonogram. One might think that the sign was too ominous to be used as a common phonogram in the writing-system, but in general hieroglyphs of gods and goddesses, of men and women, and to a lesser degree of animals, are not or hardly ever used as phonograms. It is remarkable, however, that this sign and symbol of the god of confusion was used as a determinative to classify and to categorize Egyptian words. The Egyptians had of course no officially fixed orthography as we have in modern languages. So there was much variety in the writing of words. One could add a certain determinative to a word, but it was not always necessary to do so. The spelling and writing depended largely upon the scribal tradition. In the course of their history Egyptians sometimes marked 20 or 30 words with the Seth-animal as a determinative. Obviously they were of the opinion that these words were connected and had to be classified with that fabulous animal of the desert and with the god Seth. In the last millennium B.C. this way of writing fell into disuse. This change in the system of writing is bound up with the end of the veneration of Seth as a divine reality.

In my monograph on the god Seth (Te Velde: 1967, 22-23) I have given a list of words that are determined by the Seth-animal. For convenience this list is reproduced here as an appendix to this paper. Going through the list one realizes quickly that all these words refer to rather negative aspects of reality in cosmic, social or personal life such as 'storm,' 'tumult,' 'illness.' As soon as the word for dream is determined by the Seth-animal it is classified as a bad dream or nightmare. The word for ass and the names of foreign gods that are determined by the Seth-animal as mentioned already above could be added to the list. Another word determined by the Seth-animal, that I found after I had drawn up the list given in the appendix, means 'to extort,' 'to take by force.' The shades of meanings of the words given in the list are probably richer than the dictionaries are able to give on the basis of the available text material. Anyway, the dictionaries give already more nuances than indicated in the list. But it may, as it is, suffice to give an insight into the meaning of the Seth-animal as a determinative in the hieroglyphic script. The Seth-animal or the hieroglyph of a figure with a human body and the head of the Seth-animal is an ordering element in hieroglyphic script symbolizing disorder, inherent in any living order. The hieroglyphic script in itself with its 700 images is, as was argued above, an ordering of chaotic reality. They give as symbols expression to an ideal order that is different from this reality we live in and see with our eyes. But this ideal ordered reality of the hieroglyphs included some signs, besides the Seth-animal the sparrow  or the pustule  could be mentioned, that denote disorder. Seth was a sign, a symbol and a god of the confusion within the ordered reality that cannot be ignored.



## Appendix



1. *ib*, illness
2. *ind*, to be afflicted
3. *pryt*, crisis (?)
4. *mr*, to be grievous
5. *nm*, to be one-sided, partial
6. *nsni*, rage, storm, disaster
7. *nkem*, to suffer
8. *hnn*, to disturb; tumult
9. *shb*, to boast, vaunt
10. *shb(f)*, to break up (of ship)
11. *snmw*, squalls of rain
12. *sb*, to be in confusion, to confound
13. *kri*, storm (cloud)
14. *kib*, to be harsh, overbearing
15. *kbb*, to harm, to be violent, to roar
16. *kbi*, to roar etc.
17. *phph*, storm
18. *n's*, to be strong, to roar

19. *nbnb (= nbmbm)*, to roar
20. *bmhmt*, war-shout
21. *h'ht*, storm
22. *srk*, snow
23. *hyt*, illness
24. *rsnt*, nightmare

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