

3.26 Horuscippus

Dark brown serpentinite.

Second half of the Ptolemaic Period, c. 180–30 BC.

H. 10.2 cm, W. 5.7 cm, D. 2.3 cm.

The term “horuscippus” is used in Egyptology to refer to a double-sided stela with on the front a figure in the round of the god Horus as a nude child standing on

crocodiles. His hands grasp snakes and scorpions, and hold a gazelle by the horns and a lion by the tail. He is flanked by a lotus flower with two tall feathers on a staff, the emblem of the youthful god Nefertem of Memphis, and a falcon on a papyrus stalk, another form of the god Horus. Above his head is the face of the dwarf-like god Bes. The back of the horuscippus, and often also the sides, are usually inscribed with magical spells. Apotropaic figures of other deities can be added in relief on the front and back.



Horuscuppi, or Horus stelae, as they are also called, come in many different sizes, varying from very large, like the famous “Metternich Stela” in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York,¹ with a height of well over 80 cm, to small enough to be worn around the neck as amulets.² The earliest examples date from the later Ramesside Period, but already at the end of the 18th Dynasty stelae with a depiction in relief of a child god holding snakes, scorpions and other dangerous animals are known. On these stelae the god is usually called Shed, “the Saviour”. The later horuscippi clearly derive from these earlier stelae.

Horuscuppi have been found in houses, tombs and temples alike. As texts and iconography make clear, their main purpose was to provide protection against dangerous animals such as snakes, scorpions and crocodiles, or cure people who had been bitten by these creatures. Wild beasts, including gazelles and other relatively harmless animals, were associated with the desert, the domain of chaos, situated outside the ordered world of creation. This is the reason why horuscippi are sometimes found in tombs as well, for they are also useful for the protection of the deceased against the powers of chaos which try to prevent his rebirth.

The texts usually refer to the daily rebirth of the sun god, who has to conquer the forces of chaos before he can rise again in the morning, or to an episode of the myth of Horus and Seth. After Seth murdered Osiris, Isis had given birth to Horus, Osiris’s son and heir, and hidden the child in the marshes of the Nile Delta. Seth eventually discovered where Horus was and sent a scorpion to bite him, but Isis, the great magician of the gods, managed to save the child with her magical powers. Just as Horus was saved by the spells of Isis, so any human being for whom the spells on the horuscippus were recited would be cured after being bitten by a dangerous animal. In fact, it was not even necessary to recite the spells; just rubbing them had a protective effect. One could also pour water over the horuscippus and drink it, or the water could be poured over the chest (the heart) of the patient.

Horuscuppi essentially belong to the world of folk religion, not to the official state religion celebrated in the great temples. They have nevertheless also been found in temples, particularly in the Late Period, where they were probably set up in areas within the temple precinct which were accessible to ordinary people. Some of these horuscippi were dedicated by high officials, usually priests. Statues of priests holding a horuscippus which are covered from top to bottom with magical inscriptions are also known. The owner of such a statue then

acted as intermediary between the people and the world of the gods whom he represented.

The horuscippus in our collection is a small one, but it must nevertheless have been erected somewhere, probably in a house, for there are no holes or loops to suspend it around a person’s neck. It shows clear signs of having been used: it has been rubbed smooth in several places, including the face of the Horus child. The reverse shows at the top a row of deities, most of which are barely recognizable. One of them is a falcon standing on the back of an oryx antelope; this is Horus of Hebenu, one of the many forms of the god Horus, and one particularly associated with the triumph over the forces of chaos.

Below these divine figures is a long inscription of fourteen lines; the edges of the horuscippus are also inscribed. The text begins with the opening lines of a spell addressing the sun god which is found very often on horuscippi: “O Old one³ who renews himself at his appointed time, aged one who causes his own renewal! May Thoth come when he hears my voice and chase away for me the monster (i.e. the crocodile, the enemy of Re) ...”. Soon after these words the text becomes incomprehensible, however. Certain words and phrases can still be recognized, but most of the text is garbled, and in line 9 the text starts all over again with the opening lines. This is a phenomenon often found on horuscippi from the middle of the Ptolemaic Period onwards, when knowledge of the hieroglyphic script was already in decline; eventually inscriptions were even replaced by meaningless pseudo-hieroglyphs.⁴ Clearly, the power of the spells was not affected by this; quite the contrary, the incomprehensibility of this hocus-pocus probably enhanced their efficacy.

JvD

¹ P.F. Dorman et al., *The Metropolitan Museum of Art: Egypt and the Ancient Near East* (New York 1987), 80–81 (No. 56).

² A good cross-section of the various types and sizes is provided by a recent catalogue of the forty horuscippi in the Louvre: A. Gasse, *Les stèles d’Horus sur les crocodiles* (Paris 2004), and by the study devoted to their development over time by H. Sternberg-El Hotabi, *Untersuchungen zur Überlieferungsgeschichte der Horusstelen. Ein Beitrag zur Religionsgeschichte Ägyptens im 1. Jahrtausend v. Chr.* (2 vols., Wiesbaden 1999).

³ The sun god is an old man when he enters the underworld at night and a child when he is reborn in the morning. In the Late Period the god Bes with his wrinkled face is identified with the old sun god, hence the Bes mask above the Horus child on the front of the horuscippus.

⁴ Sternberg-El Hotabi, *Horusstelen* I, 127 ff.

