







## The Elephant as a Sacred Animal of the Egyptian God Seth during the Græco-roman Period

♦ Dr. Sara El Sayed Kitat

The elephant was named in the ancient Egyptian language as Abw   <sup>1</sup>, dnbr   <sup>2</sup>, and tnbr<sup>3</sup>. The African elephant, namely *Loxodonta Africana* was depicted among the numerous fauna in Egypt<sup>4</sup>.

This type of elephants was found carved on the cosmetic palettes, ivory carvings, painted ceramics, rock paintings, as well as bone remains<sup>5</sup>. The name of the island of Elephantine was probably driven from its name<sup>6</sup>. Elephantine was called in the ancient times

---

♦Lecturer in the Tour Guiding Department - Faculty of Tourism and Hotels - Alexandria University

<sup>1</sup> A. Erman, and H. Grapow, **Wörterbuch der ägyptischen Sprache**, Akademie Verlag, Berlin, 1971, Band I, p. 7, no. 15; L. Störk, "Elefant", in W. Helck, E. Otto, and W. Westendorf (eds.), **Lexikon der Ägyptologie**, Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden, 1975, Band I, col. 1214


<sup>2</sup> **Ibid.**, col. 1214; K. Sethe, and W. Helck, **Urkundungen des ägyptischen Altertums**, J.C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, Leipzig, 1904, Band II, p.102.

<sup>3</sup> Störk, **op.cit.**, col. 1214.

<sup>4</sup> **Ibid.**, col. 1214; S. R. K. Glanville, "Egyptian Theriomorphic Vessels in the British Museum", **Journal of Egyptian Archaeology**, Egypt Exploration Society, London, 1926, vol. 12, p. 54, tf. 13,1; A. Scharff, "Vorgeschichtliches zur Libyerfrage", **Zeitschrift für ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde**, Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft, Berlin, 1926, Band 61, tf.1; G. Bénédite, "The Carnarvon Ivory", **Journal of Egyptian Archaeology**, Egypt Exploration Society, London, 1918, vol. 5, p. 234; S. Lothar, E. Schwaiger (trans.), "Elephants", in D. Redford (ed.), **The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt**, American University Press, Cairo, 2001, vol. 1, p. 467.

<sup>5</sup> M. Bunson, **A Dictionary of Ancient Egypt**, Oxford University Press, New York, 1995, p. 151; Lothar, **op.cit.**, p. 467.

<sup>6</sup> **Ibid.**, p. 467; Störk, **op.cit.**, col. 1214; O. Krzyszkowska and R. Morkot, "Elephant Ivory: Sources", in Paul T. Nicholson, Ian Shaw (eds.), **Ancient Egyptian Materials and Technology**, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000, pp. 322-331.

as AbDw  that means “elephant land”<sup>7</sup>. The African elephant was eradicated north of Aswan by the end of the Predynastic period. This was because of many reasons; the continuous human disturbance and hunting as well as the desiccation during that time. The elephants were hunted to make use of their ivory, and leather<sup>9</sup>.

In Hierakonopolis, an elephant was discovered among other animals in tomb 12. This tomb dates back to the predynastic times, apparently to Naqada III<sup>10</sup>. Near Silwa Bahari, between Edfu and Kom Ombo, there is a carved drawing probably from Naqada I depicting an African elephant among other animals which are two horned rhinoceros, a scimitar horned oryx, and a gazelle (fig.1)<sup>11</sup>.

In the Old Kingdom onwards, the African elephants seemed to have lived in the Upper Nubian regions till the fifth cataract<sup>12</sup>. In addition to the African elephants, Egypt welcomed the Syrian elephants which were hunted by Tuthmosis I and Tuthmosis III near Nija on the Orontes River (Qalat El-Madiq) in Syria. This was

---

<sup>7</sup> Bunson, *op.cit.*, p. 84; E. A. W. Budge, *The Gods of the Egyptians; or Study in the Egyptian Mythology*, Dover Publication, New York, 1969, vol. 2, p. 51; D. Franke, “Elephantine”, in D. Redford (ed.), *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*, American University Press, Cairo, 2001, vol. 1, p. 465.

<sup>8</sup> Lothar, *op.cit.*, p. 467; According to Wallis Budge, the island was called by this name not because that the elephant was venerated there. This nomination is because of the shape of the island that resembled the shape of the elephant’s body. For further details see; Budge, *op.cit.*, p. 365

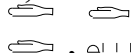
<sup>9</sup> P. F. Houlihan, *The Animal World of the Pharaohs*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1996, pp. 41, 71.

<sup>10</sup> Houlihan, *op.cit.*, p. 4; B. Adams, “Hierakonopolis”, in Kathryn A. Bard, Steven Blake Shubert (eds.) *Encyclopedia of the Archaeology of Ancient Egypt*, Routledge, London, 1999, pp. 445-449.

<sup>11</sup> Houlihan, *op.cit.*, p. 40.

<sup>12</sup> Störk, *op.cit.*, col. 1214; J. De Morgan, U. Bouriant, G. Legrain, and G. Jéquier, *Catalogue des monuments et inscriptions de l’Égypte antique 1; De la frontière de Nubie à Kom Ombo*, Adolphe Holzhausen, Vienne, 1894, p. 183.

recorded on the walls of the tomb of Rekhmire, the vizier of both Tuthmosis III and his son Amenhotep II (fig.2)<sup>13</sup>.

Both the stela of Aramant and Gabal Barkal recorded that Tuthmosis III killed a herd of 120 elephants near Nija. Amenemheb, the high officer of the king recorded that the life of Tuthmosis was threatened by a bull there. However, he was saved when Amenemheb succeeded in severing the trunk  (Drt)<sup>14</sup> of the largest elephant. This story is recorded in the officer's tomb in Thebes (no.85). This type of elephants is called *Elephas maximus*. It is originally a subspecies of the Indian elephants<sup>15</sup>. By the fourth century B.C., Alexander the Great brought the Indian elephants from India to the Near East. They were trained for military issues. In 321 B.C., Perdikkas, who was one of Alexander's leaders, used the Indian elephants in his attempt to capture Memphis during the reign of Ptolemy I. That probably explains the single representation of the elephant as an offering in the tomb of Petosiris at Tuna El Gebel that dates back to late period and the early Ptolemaic era. The shape of the elephant is carved on the eastern wall of the main chapel of the tomb (fig.3)<sup>16</sup>.

By the reign of both Ptolemy II and Ptolemy V, catching elephants began to be practiced in the Nile region as well as the

<sup>13</sup> Störk, *op.cit.*, col. 1214; Sethe, and Helck, *op.cit.*, 1906, Band IV, 103 f. 893 f,1233f , 1245f; G. Davies, Paintings from the Tomb of Rekh-mi-Re' at Thebes, **Publications of the Metropolitan Museum of Art**, Department of Egyptian Art, Metropolitan Museum, New York, 1935, vol. 10, tf. 12; Houlihan, *op.cit.*, pp. 203-204; Lothar, *op.cit.*, p. 467.

<sup>14</sup> Erman and Grapow *op.cit.*, Band V, p. 584, no.9; Lothar, *op.cit.*, p. 467; Störk, *op.cit.*, col. 1214; P. E. Newberry, "The Elephant's Trunk called its drt (art) 'hand'", **Journal of Egyptian Archaeology**, Egypt Exploration Society, London, 1944, vol. 30, p. 75; Houlihan, *op.cit.*, p. 71

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71; Lothar, *op.cit.*, p. 467; the Syrian elephants were recorded in another Theban tomb whose owner's name is now lost (no. 119); Houlihan, *op.cit.*, p. 204.

<sup>16</sup> Lothar, *op.cit.*, p. 467; G. Lefebvre, **Le Tombeau de Petosiris**, Institut Français d'archéologie orientale, Le Caire, 1923-24, pp. 130-144, PL. XXXV ; For further details see;

غادة إبراهيم محمد سيد أحمد، التصاوير الجدارية لمقبرة بيتوزيريس: دراسة تحليلية للفن المصري و اليوناني بالمقبرة، رسالة ماجستير غير منشورة ، كلية الفنون الجميلة ، جامعة حلوان ، 2008.

region of the Red Sea<sup>17</sup>. The Ptolemies apparently became impressed by the elephants which were used in the Seleucid war. However, they used the African rather than the Indian elephants. These elephants were captured from the Mareotic region (Ethiopia) and later on from the coast of the Red Sea between Suakin and Massawa (Trogodytike). The Indian *mahouts* were responsible for training the elephants in the Egyptian army<sup>18</sup>.

The experience of training military elephants was abandoned by the reign of Ptolemy V. This was because of realizing that the Indian elephants were much stronger than the African ones after the battle of Raphia in 217 B.C that occurred between Antiochos III and Ptolemy IV<sup>19</sup>.

According to Wallis Budge, the elephant was sacred to god Seth in the pre-dynastic times<sup>20</sup>. He stated that namely fear was the main reason behind worshipping elephant like other dangerous reptiles in ancient Egypt such as; snakes and crocodiles. The extermination of elephant probably occurred in the pre-dynastic times. Therefore, no religious mention was recorded for this type of animals. The ivory made objects dating back to the pre-dynastic times were used for ornamentation. Pre-dynastic vases show the shape of elephants. According to Budge, the depicted elephant was probably symbol of the family of whom the person made this vase or his patron deity or his tribe<sup>21</sup>. The big size of the depicted elephant confirms its deification<sup>22</sup>.

---

<sup>17</sup> Störk, *op.cit.*, col. 1214; J. Desanges, Les Chasseurs d' Eléphants d'Abou Simbel, *Actes de 92.e Congrès National De Société Savants*, Strassbourg Colmar, 1967, p. 45; E. R. Bevan, *The House of Ptolemy: a History of Egypt under the Ptolemaic Dynasty*, Argonaut, Chicago, 1968, pp. 175- 180.

<sup>18</sup> Bunson, *op.cit.*, p. 340; Lothar, *op.cit.*, p. 467.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 467; Bunson, *op.cit.*, p. 340.

<sup>20</sup> Budge, *op.cit.*, p. 365; E. A. W. Budge, *The Gods of the Egyptians*, Dover Publication, New York, 1969, vol.1, pp. 22, 31.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>22</sup> Budge, *op.cit.*, vol.2, p. 365

Few amulets from the Pre-dynastic Period are known taking the shape of elephants (fig.4). These objects were firstly identified by the Egyptologists as bull-headed amulets. However, the round face and eyes, the curved horns, and a snout with a defined ridge confirm more to be elephant-shaped objects. The large size of the elephants, their tusks, and their aggressive iconography made them an inspiring creature for potent amulets<sup>23</sup>.

In the ancient Egyptian religion, elephants were rarely mentioned. Scholars believe that the elephant was connected to the Egyptian god Seth, the god of darkness, evil powers, violence, diseases, and chaos<sup>24</sup>. Therefore, there is no wonder to find that many animals, from which the ancient Egyptian feared, were sacred to this evil deity. Among his sacred animals were the oryx, the black pig, the donkey, the bull, the turtle, the gazelle, the boar, hippopotamus, and the serpents<sup>25</sup>.



---

<sup>23</sup> A. Dorothea, "An Egyptian Bestiary", *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, Spring, 1995, vol. 52, no. 4, pp. 1-64.

<sup>24</sup> Störk, *op.cit.*, col. 1214; H. O. Thompson, *Mekal the God of Beth Shan*, E. J. Brill, Leiden 1970, p. 139; V. Ions, *Egyptian Mythology*, Paul and Hamlyn, London, 1988, p. 63; T. H. Velde, "Seth", in W. Helck, E. Otto, and W. Westendorf (eds.), *Lexikon der Ägyptologie*, Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden, 1984, Band V, col. 908; A. Mercatante, *Who's Who in Egyptian Mythology*, The Scarecrow Press, Lanham – London, 1978, p. 145; A. Mercatante, *The Facts on File Encyclopedia of World Mythology and Legend*, Facts on File, New York, 1998, p. 582; M. Jordan, *Encyclopedia of Gods*, Facts on File, New York, 1993, p. 233; P. Hamlyn, *Egyptian Mythology*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1965, p. 64; G. Roeder, "Der Name und das Tier des Gottes Set", *Zeitschrift für ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde*, Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft, Berlin, 1912, Band 50, p. 84; T. H. Velde, *Seth the God of Confusion*, E. J. Brill, Leiden, 1977, pp. 1-3; R. Wilkinson, *The Complete Gods and Goddesses of Ancient Egypt*, American University Press, Cairo, 2005, p. 200.

عبد الحليم نور الدين، الديانة المصرية القديمة، الجزء الأول: المعبودات، الأقصى للطباعة، القاهرة، 2009، الطبعة الأولى، ص 248.

<sup>25</sup> C. Leitz, *Das Lexikon der ägyptischen Götter und Götterbezeichnungen*, Orientalia Lovaniensia analecta, Peeters, Leuven, 2002, Band VI, pp. 691-696; R. A. Armour, and A. Baker, *Gods and Myths of Ancient Egypt*, American University Press, Cairo, 1986, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. pp. 53-54; N. Guillhou, and J. Peyré, *La Mythologie Égyptienne*, Marabout, Paris, 2006, pp. 360-361; M. Lurker, G. L. Campbell (trans.), *Dictionary of Gods and Goddesses Devils and Demons*, Routledge, London, 1987, pp. 318-319; Jordan, *op.cit.*, p. 233; L. Spence, *Ancient*

In the Egyptian mythology, Seth fights off the snake of Apep serpent by standing on the bows of the solar Braque. This serpent became at the same time the sacred snake of Seth that embodies his evil powers<sup>26</sup>. The serpent of Seth was called aApp  <sup>27</sup> or r(k)rk  <sup>28</sup>. According to the Egyptian mythology, this serpent was a symbol of recreation. He could daily renew himself through his daily combat with god Re<sup>29</sup>. On an ivory handle knife dating back to Naqada III and preserved in the Brooklyn Museum, the African elephant is depicted standing over an intertwined serpent (fig. 5)<sup>30</sup>. If the object has any religious symbol, the elephant here might represent Seth himself together with the Apep snake. Both of them are two sacred animals of Seth.

In the ancient Egyptian religion, Horus was depicted trampling and spearing many evil animals that were connected to god Seth<sup>31</sup>. In a cave from Wadi Sura in the southwestern corner of Egypt, the fabulous beast of Seth, a giraffe as well as an elephant were led by a tribal leader called pn Abw “*the elephant*” and dedicated to Hr

---

**Egyptian Myths and Legends**, Dover Publications, New York, 1990, p. 103; Velde, **op.cit.**, 1977, pp. 31-33; Wilkinson, **op.cit.**, p. 200; I. Franco, **Petit Dictionnaire de Mythologie Egyptienne**, Editions Entende, Paris, 1993, p. 231; Ions, **op.cit.**, p. 65; Budge, **op.cit.**, vol.2, pp. 191-192, 247; D. S. Donadoni, “Per La Morfologia del Dio Seth”, **Mitteilung des deutschen arhäologischen Instituts**, Abteilung Kairo ,Weisbaden, 1981, Band 37, p. 118, 122; Jordan, **op.cit.**, p. 233; A. Blottière, **Petit Dictionnaire des dieux Égyptiens**, Zulma, France, 2000, p. 123;

عبد الحلیم نور الدین، المرجع السابق، ص253.

<sup>26</sup> Lurker, **op.cit.**, p.319.


<sup>27</sup> Leitz, **op.cit.**, pp. 691-696; Spence, **op.cit.**, p. 100; Budge, **op.cit.**, vol.2, pp. 245-247; Erman and Grapow **op.cit.**, Band I, p. 167, no.14.

<sup>28</sup> **Ibid.**, Band II, p. 440, no.2. R. O. Faulkner, **A Concise Dictionary of Middle Egyptian**, Oxford University Press, London, 1964, p. 153; Erman and Grapow **op.cit.**, Band II, 440, no.2.

<sup>29</sup> Budge, **op.cit.**, vol.2, pp. 245-247; Wilkinson, **op.cit.**, pp. 198-199; R. T. R. Clark, **Myth and Symbol in Ancient Egypt**, Thames and Hudson, London, 1959, pp. 208-212.

<sup>30</sup> Houlihan, **op.cit.**, p. 41, fig. 31

<sup>31</sup> A. Churchward, **The Origin and Evolution of Religion**, Goerge & Unwin Ltd., London, 1924, pp. 105-107

“Horus” (fig.6)<sup>32</sup>. According to the previous inscription, the three animals, which were consecrated to the cult of god Seth, were here taken under the divine control of god Horus. This is confirmed by the depiction of the elephant beneath the falcon of Horus who is here standing over the srx sign . This confirms apparently the control of Horus over the animals of Seth including the elephant.

It is known that the horse, the antelope, the pig, the hippopotamus, the crocodiles were sacred to Seth who was defeated by Horus<sup>33</sup>. The latter was depicted trampling over the animals Seth. This iconography reflects that Horus is capable to ward off the evil powers manifested through these animals. This iconography is represented through the so-called cippi of Horus<sup>34</sup>. For instance, a limestone cippi of Horus is now preserved in the British Museum (no. 49.737) and dates back to late period. Harpocrates is carved en-face trampling over three crocodiles and an entwined snake under them. In his hands, the god grasps snakes and serpents (fig. 7)<sup>35</sup>.

---

<sup>32</sup> J. C. Darnell, “Opening the Narrow Doors of the Theban Desert: Discoveries of the Theban Desert Road Survey”, in R. Friedman (ed.), **Egypt and Nubia; Gifts of the Desert**, The British Museum Press, London 2002, pp. 132-155; J. C. Darnell, “Theban Desert Road Survey I: The Rock Inscriptions of Gebel Tjauti”, **The Theban Western Desert and the Rock Inscriptions of the Wadi el Hôl**, Oriental Institute Publication 117, Chicago, 2002, Part 1, pp. 1-45.





<sup>33</sup> Lurker, **op.cit.**, p. 319.

<sup>34</sup> Wilinkson, **op.cit.**, p. 132; L. Kakosy, “Horusstele”, in W. Helck, E. Otto, and W. Westendorf (eds.), **Lexikon der Ägyptologie**, Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden, 1980, Band III, cols. 60-61; L. Kakosy, “Egyptian Healing Statues in Three Museums in Italy”, **Catalogo Del Museo Egizio Di Torino, Serie Prima, Monumenti E Testi**, Torino, 1999, vol. IX, p. 160; H. Junker, **Onurislegende**, Hoelder, Wien, 1917, p. 107; R. Lachaud, **Magie et Initiation en Egypte Pharaonique**, Editions Dangles, France, 1995, p. 59; E. A. W. Budge, **Amulets and Superstitions**, Dover Publication, New York, 1978, p. 165; E. A. W. Budge, **Egyptian Magic**, Dover Publication, New York, 1971, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, p. 267; D. Frankfurter, **Religion in Roman Egypt: Assimilation and Resistance**, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1961, p. 119.

<sup>35</sup> H. S. El Hotabi, “Untersuchungen zur Überlieferungsgeschichte der Horusstelen: Ein Beitrag zu Religiönesgeschichte Ägyptens im 1. Jahrtausend v. Chr Teil II. (Materialsammlung)”, **Ägyptologische Abhandlungen**, Harrassowitz Verlag Wiesbaden, 1999, Band 62, p. 58, Tafel, XLIII a, b.

In addition, a terra cotta figurine depicts Harpokrates riding an elephant which is led by a small boy. Harpokrates is depicted with his Roman costumes of a soldier and holding his shield. He was frequently depicted riding on a horse or an elephant recalling the victory of Dionysus against India (fig.8)<sup>36</sup>.

Like the case of the cippi of Horus, the figurine could also represent the concept of Harpokrates who ward off the evil spirits of god Seth that are manifested through the elephant.

There was a certain hieroglyphic sign that is called nib which means burning incense<sup>37</sup>. Nib was also used to refer to a certain balsam plant that is styrax; . In the Greek times, this word was pronounced nib and niwbn and written as; . Another sign was also used to represent this word in the Greek period which is a man riding an elephant; , . In that case, the sign was pronounced nnib. This word was mentioned in the medical papyrus of Harris. Pieces of this tree were sent to the temple of Amun and Ptah. <sup>39</sup>.


<sup>36</sup> M. El –Abbad, A. Abd El Fattah, M. Seif El Din, and F. Hassan (eds.), **Alexandria Græco-Roman Period; A Thematic Guide**, National Center for Documentation of Cultural and National Heritage and the Supreme Council of Antiquities, Cairo, 2002, p. 119; From Thrace Dionysus went to India, in which he conquered armies that he mustered on his way by the aid of his own spells. With these troops, he returned to Greece accompanied by a triumphal procession in a chariot decorated in vine-leaves and drawn by panthers. His escorts were the Sileni, Bacchantes, satyrs and other fertility demons, such as the god Priapus; P. Grimal, **Larousse World Mythology**, Chartwell Books, Secaucus, New Jersey, 1965, pp. 137-139; A. Cotterell, **A Dictionary of World Mythology**, G.P. Putman's Sons, New York, 1980, pp. 138-139


<sup>37</sup> Erman and Grapow **op.cit.**, Band II, 276, 12, 13 14 ; P. Wilson, **A Lexicographical Study of The Ptolemaic Texts in The Temple of Edfu**, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool, 1991, vol. II, p.937 ; V. Lorct, **Recueil de travaux relatifs à la philologie et à l'archéologie égyptiennes et assyriennes**, Paris, 1894, Tome 16, pp. 148-152.

<sup>38</sup> E. A. W. Budge, **Egyptian Hieroglyphic Dictionary**, part. 1, Dover Publication, New York, 1978, p. 348

<sup>39</sup> Budge, **op.cit.**, 1978, p. 348



According to Loret, the previous medical plant was imported from Asia or Syria. At Edfu temple, this word was used among the laboratory texts. It was listed among other substances; . There is a recipe of making the best pieces of the myrrh plant. A list of substances includes Axm ntyw tp which means the “eyes of Re Horus and Osiris”<sup>40</sup>. In the temple of Denderah, the hieroglyphic sign of nnib was also found (fig. 9)<sup>41</sup>.

The man riding the elephant could be god Horus, namely Horus the child Hr pA Xrd  who is here placing his finger at his mouth<sup>42</sup>. It might represent the person who is bringing the incense from the Nubian region. The sign might have also a symbolic religious value to reflect Horus who is riding his elephant. It was known in ancient Egypt that Horus, namely Harpokrates was healing from the diseases and evil spirits that were manifested through the evil powers of god Seth<sup>43</sup>.

In other words, the styrax tree which had a certain medical function was written with a sign reflecting the triumph of Harpokrates over the diseases of god Seth. The latter was depicted here in the form of an elephant.

Furthermore, the Egyptian god Seth was assimilated with another foreign god that took the shape of an elephant. This god is

---

<sup>40</sup> Wilson, *op.cit.*, p. 937 ; M. Rochemonteix, puis E. Chassinat, **Le Temple de Edfou**, Institut Français d'archéologie orientale, Le Caire, 1984-1987, Tome II 220, 16 ; 22, 1 ; Tome II 222 ; 14 ; Tome II 223,1-2 ; Tome I 566,1.



<sup>41</sup> E. Chassinat and F. Dumas, **Le Temple De Denderah**, Institut Français d'archéologie orientale, Le Caire, 1935, Tome III, pp. 128, 7 ; S. Cauville, **Denderah** Traduction, Pelgium : Peeters Press, France, 2000, Tome III p. 489.

<sup>42</sup> Hamlyn, *op.cit.*,p.39;Wilkinson,*op.cit.*,p.132;Erman and Grapow *op.cit.*,Band III,p.123,no. 6

<sup>43</sup> J. Nunn, **Ancient Egyptian Medicine**, The British Museum Press, London, 1996, p.98; Junker *op.cit.*, pp.3-4 ; In ancient Egypt, Seth was god of evil including sickness and epidemics. In the Egyptian myth, Seth plucked out the eye of Horus and caused him great pain that was named (skr). For further details see; Velde, *op.cit.*, 1977, p .38- 47; N. Ebeid, **Egyptian Medicine in the Days of the Pharaohs**, The American University Press, Cairo, 1996, 1<sup>st</sup> ed., p.379

the Canaanite god of fertility who is called Mekal<sup>44</sup>. Thompson argued that the god Mekal at Beth Shan<sup>45</sup> resembled the Egyptian god Seth. He noted that an Egyptian sanctuary and cult existed there in the 15<sup>th</sup> century B.C<sup>46</sup>.

The so-called Mekal stela that was discovered in the temple of Beth Shan, represents Mekal in the seated position (fig. 10)<sup>47</sup>. He is depicted wearing the headdress adorned with two curved horns<sup>48</sup>.

He holds the was scepter  in his left hand and the ankh sign  in the other hand<sup>49</sup>. The Egyptian dedicators of the stela as well as their father are represented paying homage in front of the deity and present lotus flowers to him. The inscription over the head of the deity described him as; “ma kaI lord of Beth Shan”<sup>50</sup>. A pottery piece object for god Seth dating back to the reign of Beth Shan VII, is taking the shape of elephant<sup>51</sup>. This period is contemporary to the

---

<sup>44</sup> H. O. Thompson, “Tell el Husn; Biblical Beth-shan”, **The Biblical Archaeologist**, The American Schools of Oriental Research, Boston, 1967, vol. 30, no. 4, pp. 109-135; P. E. McGovern, “Beth-Shan”, in D. N. Freedman (ed.), **The Anchor Bible Dictionary**, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2007, vol. I, pp. 693-696.

<sup>45</sup> It is known that Beth Shan is a small town in Palestine between the Jezreel and Jordan Valleys 30 km. south of Lake Kinneret or Sea of Galilee. In the 13<sup>th</sup> century B.C., namely the early Iron age, this city became under the authority of Egypt. This occurred in the reign of Tuthmosis III and recorded on the walls of Karnak temple. Excavations revealed objects that date back to Tuthmosis III, Seti I, Ramses II, and Ramses III. In the Græco-roman times, Beit She'an was called Scythopolis (city of the Scythians, probably mercenaries who, as veterans, settled there). The prosperity of the city reached its peak during the Roman- Byzantine period, when a new civic center was built, surrounded by residential quarters; in the Byzantine period it was also fortified with a city wall; **Ibid.**, pp.693-696

<sup>46</sup> Thompson, **op.cit.**, 1970, pp. 123-131; Thompson, **op.cit.**, 1967, pp. 109-135; J. Eggler, “Mekal”, in **“Iconography of Deities and Demons in the Ancient Near East; an Iconographic Dictionary with Special Emphasis on the First Millennium BCE Palestine/ Israel”**, Sponsored by the Swiss National Science Foundation, 2006, 2.

[http://www.religionswissenschaft.uzh.ch/idd/prepublications/e\\_idd\\_mekal.pdf](http://www.religionswissenschaft.uzh.ch/idd/prepublications/e_idd_mekal.pdf)

<sup>47</sup> Eggler, **op.cit.**, p.1.

<sup>48</sup> H. Thiersch, Ein hellenistischer Kolossal Kopf aus Besan, **Nachrichten der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen**, Philologisch-Historische Klasse, Göttingen 1932, pp. 52-76.

<sup>49</sup> Eggler, **op.cit.**, p.1.

<sup>50</sup> **Ibid.**, p.1.

<sup>51</sup> Thompson, **op.cit.**, pp.128-139.

New Kingdom (fig. 11)<sup>52</sup>. Moreover, the head of a Hittite seal with an ass, symbol of god Seth, bears also the head of an elephant<sup>53</sup>.

It could be concluded that the ancient Egyptians knew three types of elephants; the African elephant, the Syrian elephant, and the Indian one. However, the African type seemed to be the most popular and most hunted one. This animal was regarded by the ancient Egyptian a powerful mysterious animal. Therefore, amulets were made taking the shape of an elephant to protect the wearer from this enormous beast. There is no wonder to find that the ancient Egyptian literature praised the hunting of elephant which was usually accomplished by the king. The religious veneration for the elephant appeared by the Predynastic times in Egypt.

However, this cultic veneration of the elephant did not develop further because of the animal's extermination. The elephant appeared once again as one of the sacred animals of Seth during the Græco-roman times. By the Ptolemaic period, the political circumstances helped in realizing the physical powers of this animal especially in the war field. All of these factors helped in regarding the elephant an evil mysterious power that was consecrated for their god Seth who manifested all sorts of evil, disorder, and disturbance. The elephant was depicted among the other sacred animals of Seth in the cave of Wadi Sura in the western desert of Egypt.

The elephant was also depicted together with the Apep snake all of which manifest the evil powers of Seth. In other cases, the victory of god Horus over Seth was represented through this animal. Terra-cotta figurines from the Græco-roman period depict Harpokrates riding over the elephant to announce his victory over

---

<sup>52</sup> McGovern, *op.cit.*, pp.693-696

<sup>53</sup> Thompson, *op.cit.*, pp.128-139; Budge, *op.cit.*, 1969, vol. 1, pp. 22, 31; Budge, *op.cit.*, 1969, vol.2, p. 365; For further details see; D. Collon, "Ivory", *Iraq*, British Institute for the Study of Iraq, London, Autumn 1977, vol. 39, no. 2, pp. 219-222.

Seth. This hypothesis is also confirmed through the writing of the hieroglyphic sign nnib which means styrax tree. This sign is depicting a man riding on the back of the elephant. The man is represented placing his finger at his mouth, identically like one of the forms of god Horus, namely Harpocrates or Horus the Child. The man over the elephant might be accordingly Harpocrates who was regarded by the Egyptians their healing deity who could heal from the diseases and epidemics caused by Seth. Harpocrates' therapy was achieved by bringing the styrax tree to them.

In addition, the connection between the elephant and the Egyptian god Seth was confirmed through the Canaanite god Mekal. This god was assimilated with Seth and took the shape of an elephant. Pieces of minor arts represent Mekal assimilated with Seth in the shape of an elephant.



Fig.1. A carved Bahari I, Silwa  
Bahari between Edfu and Kom Ombo  
After: P. F. Houlihan, **The Animal World of the Pharaohs**, Thames and Hudson, London,  
1996, fig.30.

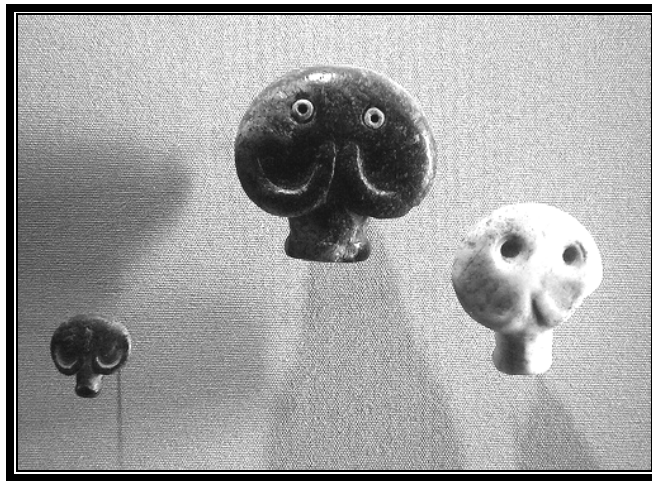


Fig.2. *Painting on the wall of tomb of Rekhmire showing animals offered to the deities including on the far left an elephant, 18<sup>th</sup> dynasty, Luxor, Egypt.*

After: <http://www.featurepics.com/online/Ancient-Egyptian-Fresco-1768189.aspx>



**Fig.3.** Keepers leading a young elephant, tomb of Petosiris, Ptolemaic period, Tuna El Gebel, El Menia Governorate  
After: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/norashalaby/4450690323/sizes/z/in/photostream/>



**Fig.4.** Egyptian Amulets made of bone (left), chlorite (center), and calcite (right), depicting the head of an elephant, Late Naqada II, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York  
After: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/ggnyc/1772344753/>

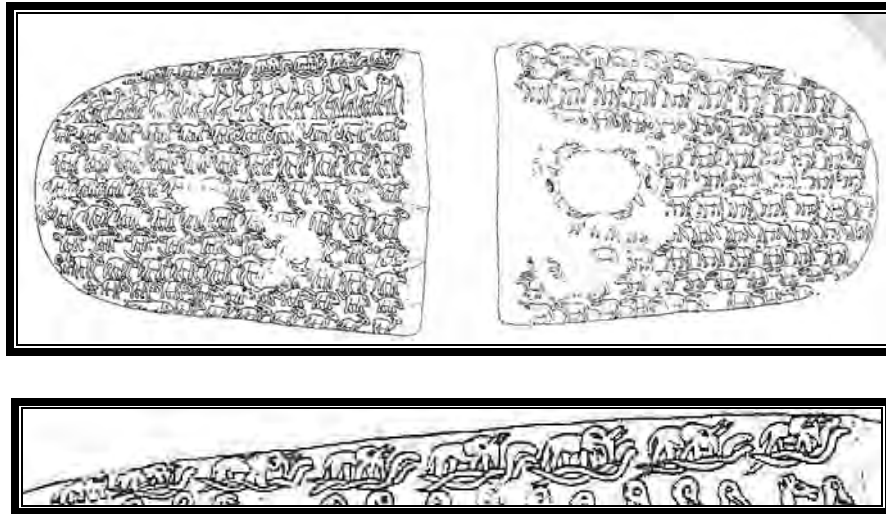


Fig.5. An ivory handle of a knife depicting the African elephants among other hunted animals trampling over the entwined serpent, Naqada III, Brooklyn Museum, New York

After: Houlihan, *op.cit.*, fig. 31.

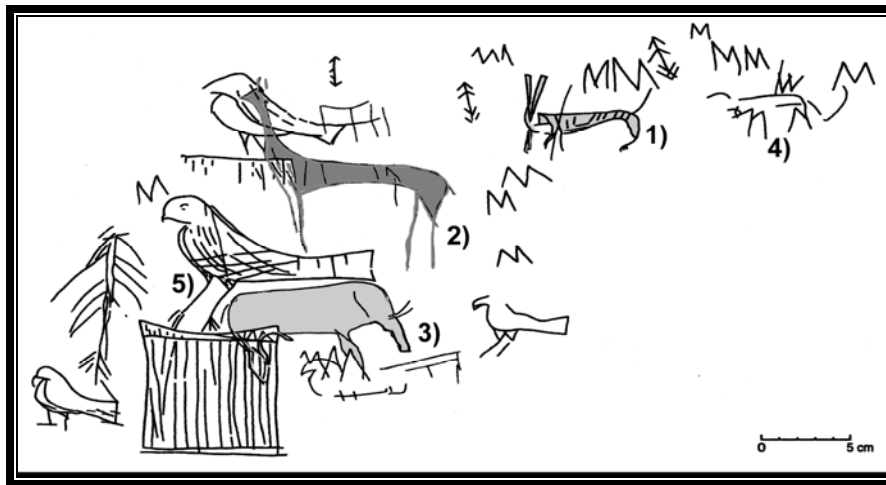


Fig.6. The Elephant figure (number 3) in a cave from Wadi Sura, Predynastic period, western desert, Gebel Uweinat, Egypt  
After: J. C. Darnell, "Opening the Narrow Doors of the Theban Desert: Discoveries of the Theban Desert Road Survey", in R. Friedman (ed.), *Egypt and Nubia; Gifts of the Desert*, The British Museum Press, London, 2002, *abb.3*.



**Fig.7.** One of the cippi of Horus depicting Harpocrates grasping two snakes and trampling over three crocodiles and a snake, late period, British Museum, London

After: H. S. El Hotabi, "Untersuchungen zur Überlieferungsgeschichte der Horusstelen: Ein Beitrag zu Religiönesgeschichte Ägyptens im 1. Jahrtausend v. Chr Teil II. (Materialsammlung)", **Ägyptologische Abhandlungen**, Harrassowitz Verlag Wiesbaden, 1999, Band 62, Tafel, XLIII a.



**Fig.8.** A terracotta statuette of Harpocrates riding an elephant which is led by a small boy, 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD., Græco Roman Museum, Alexandria

After: M. El -Abbadi, A. Abd El Fattah, M. Seif El Din, and F. Hassan (eds.), **Alexandria Græco-Roman Period; A Thematic Guide**, National Center for Documentation of Cultural and National Heritage and the Supreme Council of Antiquities, Cairo, 2002, p.117.





Fig.9. The hieroglyphic sign nnib, Græco-roman Period, Denderah temple



Fig.10. The stele of Mekal discovered in temple of Beth Shan, Early Iron Age II (Stratum IX), Beth Shan

After: <http://www.bu.edu/anep/BethShanVIIMekal.gif>



**Fig.11.** A cylindrical elephant-headed cup, Beth Shan VII, main temple, Beth Shan

After: <http://www.bu.edu/anep/BethShanPig.gif>