

KING APOPHIS OF AVARIS AND THE EMERGENCE OF MONOTHEISM

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The excavations by the Austrian Archaeological Institute in Cairo, headed by Manfred Bietak in the fields of ancient Avaris, brought back to life and back into history the shadowy “Hyksos,” known until then only by few biased accounts of later Egyptian sources. A vast town was discovered, and the identity, lifestyle and religious customs of the Asiatics that once ruled Egypt were unveiled. King Apophis was one of this town’s last inhabitants. This article is dedicated to Manfred Bietak as a token of appreciation for his life-long endeavor at Tell el-Dab^a and his remarkable contribution to Egyptology.

The idea that one god could be worshipped exclusively – sprung from cultural environment which has, from time immemorial, nourished a rich pantheon of deities – was a great shift in the history of ideas as well as in the history of Egypt. This “intellectual leap” was always attributed to the Egyptian King Akhenaten, who made the Aten, the solar disk, his only god, shunning all other gods and their manifestations.

Nevertheless, in a 19th dynasty literary text, this revolutionary concept of veneration of “one god and no other” is attributed not to Akhenaten, but to a foreigner – the Hyksos ruler Apophis:

*hpr swt wn in t3 n Kmt {nw} <m> i3dt iw nn wn nb c.w.s.
< m> nsw <n> hrw hpr ist rf ir nsw Sknn-Rc c.w.s sw m
hk3 c.w.s. n niwt rsy i3dt m dmüt 3mw iw wr Ippy c.w.s m
Hwt w^crt iw hrp n.f p3-t3 r-dr.f hry b3kw.sn Mhty m mitt
hry hrt nbt nfrt n< t3>-mh^w c^h.n nsw Ippy c.w.s hr irt n.f
St^h m nb iw.f tm b3k n ntr nb nty m p3-t3 r-dr.f w^pwt¹
St^h² iw.f hr kd hwt-ntr m b3k nfr nh^h ... (GARDINER 1932:
85, 4–11)*

“It once happened that the land of Egypt was in misery, for there was no lord l.p.h. [as] (sole) king. A day came to pass when king Seqenenre’, l.p.h. acted as a Ruler³ l.p.h., of the Southern city. Pestilence⁴ was in the town of the Asiatics, while (the) great one Apophis was in Avaris, as the entire land paid him tribute, delivering their taxes – also the north – bringing every sort of good product of the Delta. Then, *king Apophis l.p.h. adopted for himself Seth as lord, and he refused to serve any god that was in the entire land except Seth.* And he built a temple of fine workmanship for eternity...”

Most scholars reading this part of the text today called “The Quarrel of Apophis and Seqenenre’ ” have regarded the predicative transgression of Apophis to be the “veneration of Seth,” i.e., the fact that he worshiped Seth-Ba^a and not other “better” gods (such as Re^c or Amun).⁵

The worship of Seth could hardly have been regarded as a religious transgression during the 19th dynasty when the text in question was put into writing.⁶ It comes down to us on papyrus Sallier I, dated to the days of king Merneptah. Besides the story, the papyrus contains school-texts known in Egyptological terminology as *Miscellanies* (GARDINER 1932: XIII).

As the story appears in a collection used as school material, it seems that it belonged to the institutional repertoire and therefore should reflect mainstream ideological decorum of the 19th dynasty. During this period, Seth reached the highest position he would ever attain in the canon of Egyptian official religion. Two reigning kings of the 19th dynasty called them-

¹ This is Gardiner’s reconstruction. The upper right part of the *w^p* sign can be seen unequivocally in the facsimile.

² Gardiner’s reading.

³ The word *hk3* “ruler” is written within a cartouch.

⁴ For *i3dt* as “pestilence,” see FAULKNER 1962:9. On a possible outbreak of the black plague, called in the Egyptian sources “the Asiatic illness,” see GOEDICKE 1984, 89–105. It is possible that the writer plays on the different possible meanings of the word. Here, too, as in line 1 of the text, the word can be translated as “misery,” as suggested by WENTE 1972: 8. For emergency burials all over the town of Avaris

to be dated before 1700 (stratum G/F) = shortly before the beginning of the 14th dynasty, see BIETAK 1984: 312–349. Yet he does not report any such burials during Apophis’ era (see below note 20).

⁵ E.g. GOEDICKE 1986: 10–11; STADELMANN 1967: 18. Apophis carries throne names combined with the theophoric name R^c, see SCHNEIDER 1998: 71–73. However, the text gives the impression that the veneration of Seth might have been a conscious step; see also GOEDICKE 1986: 10, nos. 60, 61.

⁶ The grammar of the text points to a composition date close to its documentation in writing.

selves “The Sethian,”⁷ and Ramesses II openly venerated Seth.⁸

There is, however, another way to read Apophis’ transgression. According to this reading, the actual breach of Apophis was not the veneration of Seth per se, but the fact that the Hyksos ruler did not worship *any other god* in the entire land *except* Seth. The text uses the wording *wpwt Sth* which is strongly reminiscent of the formulation *wpwt hr.f* “no other but him,” attributed to the Aten, and which HORNUNG (1999: 93) regards as “the decisive step toward monotheism and its exclusivity.”

In his inscription in Akhmin, king Ay settles the score with the “evil” past of Akhenaten, the “heretic king,” declaring that in his own times anyone could make an offering to “his own god.”⁹ We may conclude that the main offense of the Akhenaten in Ay’s eyes was that, like Apophis, he venerated “solely one god” (the Aten) and banished the worship of other gods.

The historical credibility of the Ramesside tale may be judged by the fact that the plot is correctly situated in the historical setting of the Hyksos era as we reconstruct it today. Both Apophis and Seqenenre’ are known from other sources to have ruled simultaneously in Egypt during the end of this period.¹⁰ The scribe knows the name *Hwt-wꜣrt*, Tell-el Dab’a’s name during the Hyksos times, and correctly assigns it to the seat of Apophis.¹¹

Nevertheless, the 19th dynasty cultural “Sitz im Leben” of the text is disclosed later in the story in what probably makes part of the description of the personal relationship of the god Amun and the Theban ruler:

... *hnꜥ. f m nby nn hn.f [sw] n nꜥr nb nty m pꜣ-[ꜣ r-ꜥr.f] wpwt Imn-Rꜥ nsw nꜥrw* (GARDINER 1932: 87,1–2)

“...] with him as a protector. He does not bend [his back?¹²] to any god in the [whole land] besides Amon-Re the king of gods.”

The praise of Amon appears after a long lacuna, but Wente’s assumption (WENTE 1972) that it forms part of the description of the Theban ruler is rather convincing. At a first glance, this sentence seems to be almost identical to the one describing Apophis’ transgression, yet a closer look will carry the careful reader into a very different sphere – that of the linguistic register of the typical Ramesside “personal piety” texts. The god as one’s shield is a well-known metaphor in Ramesside literature,¹³ and the combination of the verb *hn* “to bend” and Amun is known from other texts.¹⁴ Moreover, Amon’s attribute “King of Gods” in the Ramesside story is an *ipso facto* recognition of the multi-member category [GOD]. The category [GOD] in the classifier system of the hieroglyphic script was abolished by Akhenaten, thus neutralizing the option of the existence of “members” in such category, i.e. other gods (GOLDWASSER 2002: 111–131).¹⁵ This attribute, “King of Gods,” is avoided in the lexical repertoire of the Aten titles.

Going back to Apophis’ sin, Donald Redford notes that the Egyptian story “charged the Hyksos implicitly with heterodoxy,” yet he sees it as one offense in a chain of sins:

“... the anomalous use of solar ritual ... would become another of Apophis’s outrages in a crescendo of crime; he despoils the land through taxation, he purposes in maniac fashion (at least for the ancients) to serve but one god, he borrows his ritual from the sacred order of service drawn by Re, and finally he tries to provoke the native ruler to taking up arms by sending insulting messages which cannot possibly be taken seriously.” (REDFORD 1970: 35, 36¹⁵).

The latest contribution to the story of Apophis and Seqenenre’ comes from Jan Assmann, who seeks the roots of the repetitive conjunction in Hellenistic historiography of the plague, invasion from the

⁷ Papyrus Turin mentions a 14th dynasty king called “The Sethian,” see BECKERATH 1999: 112–113.

⁸ For a recent discussion, see YOYOTTE 1999: 48–54; STADELMANN 1965: 66.

⁹ LD III, 114.

¹⁰ On the violent death of Seqenenre’, see BIETAK 1974.

¹¹ The name was known until the 20th Dynasty, see BIETAK 1975: 30 n.37.

¹² Checking the lacuna in pSallier I, it seems that the word *ꜣt* “back” could be a plausible reconstruction. Gardiner writes *sw*.

¹³ *hw nꜥr.i Dhwti m ikm ꜥꜣ.i* (FISCHER-ELFERT 1992: 8,3); *Imn mdi.sn m krꜥ.w KRI IV 5,1.26* (Merneptah Libyan Inscription). See also WENTE 1967: 35 n. c. The fact that the texts use

different words for “shield” – *nby*, *ikm*, *krꜥ* – and the quality of “acting as shield” is attributed to different gods and even to the king, demonstrates that we are confronted with a conceptual metaphor [THE GOD/KING IS A SHIELD] that can materialize in different gods and different nouns carrying the meaning “shield.” For the term “conceptual metaphor” see LAKOFF and JOHNSON 1980.

¹⁴ *pꜣ-hꜣn n.f ꜣt.f* in papyrus Anastasi II. For additional references, see CAMINOS 1954: 46.

¹⁵ However, in his recent book *Egypt, Canaan, and Israel in Ancient Times*, he writes that the story is “a ‘shaggy dog’ story, devoid of historical value” without any further explanation (REDFORD 1992: 125).

north, lepers, Hyksos, Jews, and the Amarna experience.¹⁶ As a result, he chooses to look upon our story as a typical post-Amarna composition:

“... The memories of this period [Amarna] survived only in the form of trauma. The first symptoms of this may have become visible as early as some forty years after the return to tradition, when concepts of religious otherness came to be fixed on the Asiatics, who were Egypt’s traditional enemies. In this context, the dislocated Amarna reminiscences began to be projected onto the Hyksos and their god Ba^{al}, who was equated with the Egyptian god Seth. In a Ramesside novel, we read that Apophis, the Hyksos king, practiced a monolatric religion ... Presumably by this time, other memories and experiences had invaded the void in the collective memory which had been created both by trauma and by annihilation of historical traces. The Hyksos conflict was thus turned into religious conflict.” (ASSMANN 1997: 28)¹⁷

Thus, Assmann sees the story as an *artificial* projection by the Ramesside text of the “Amarna sin,” i.e. monotheistic beliefs, onto the Hyksos era: actually of unification of two very different collective traumas.¹⁸ According to him, the deep (even if eradicated?) religious trauma of Amarna was projected during the 19th dynasty onto the earlier *political* trauma of the Hyksos occupation.

However, as we have mentioned above, the reverence of Seth could have hardly been used as an example of “religious otherness” during the 19th Dynasty, and it may in no way be blamed for treating Sethian beliefs (institutionally, at least) as the “counter-religion.”¹⁹ It seems that Assmann’s understanding of the Ramesside text is strongly influenced by the late

Hellenistic tradition. The Apophis story is in his opinion the earliest testimony to what much later will become the repeated, complex confounding of Amarna, the Asiatics and what he calls “counter-religion” in the Egyptian-Hellenistic historical memory. Whether one is allowed to superimpose this interpretation on an original 19th dynasty text, which does not evoke, in any way, a connection whatsoever to Akhenaten or the Amarna period, is questionable.

The Hyksos period was certainly traumatic, but not a “historical void” during the 19th dynasty.²⁰ Unlike Akhenaten, the Hyksos kings do appear in the Turin Canon list, and archaeological finds continuously confirm the existence of Hyksos rulers mentioned in the King list.²¹ The title of the Hyksos ruler in the Ramesside story alternates correctly between one occurrence as *wr* and all others as *nsw*. The name *Ippy* steadily appears throughout the story in a cartouch followed by the divine classifier – the typical spelling of royal names in hieratic texts of the period. In comparison, the “heretic king” Akhenaten, when documented in administrative records of the 19th dynasty, is called *p3-hrw n 3ht-Itn* “the enemy from Akhetaten” or *sbi* – “rebel.”²² His very name is never mentioned, not to mention placed in a cartouch or given a divine classifier.

Unlike Assmann, who sees the coupling of Amarna and the Hyksos as a result of unification and superimposition of unconnected traumas, I would like to suggest, in light of the story of Apophis and Seqenenre’, that what lies at the root of the interchangeability of their respective memories in the late Period was an *authentic* – not superimposed or artificially projected – *ideological affinity*. The fundamen-

¹⁶ For a detailed presentation and discussion of the Hellenistic tradition, including the history of research, see SCHNEIDER 1998, 76ff.

¹⁷ Earlier in his text Assmann asserts that “there was certainly no religious conflict between the Hyksos and the Egyptians. ... On the contrary, their remaining monuments show them in conformity with the religious obligations of traditional Egyptian pharaohs” (ASSMANN 1997: 24).

¹⁸ For the possibility that plagues raging during the Hyksos period and during the Amarna period also contributed to the coupling of the traumas, see ASSMANN 1997: 27 and *passim*; see also above note 4. Schneider mentions Bietak’s report on the “Lebens stress” in Avaris and the many illnesses that infested the population. He suggests that “the plague” may reflect this prevalent situation in Avaris and later reappeared as such in the Hellenistic tradition (SCHNEIDER 1998: 93).

¹⁹ TE VELDE 1977; LOPRIENO 1988: 74. The temple of Seth was not destroyed after the conquest of Avaris but contin-

ued to function throughout the 18th Dynasty and 19th dynasties, except for the Amarna period. Soon after the Amarna period Tutankhamun and Horemheb restored the temple (BIETAK 1990). It seems that Avaris (now under the new name *Prw nfr*, for this identification see BIETAK & FORSTNER-MÜLLER 2003; BIETAK, forthcoming) continued to be a worship center of Asiatic deities, see STADELMANN 1967: 56 and *passim*.

²⁰ STADELMANN 1965 is of the opinion that the first rulers of the Eighteenth dynasty, in a way followed “Hyksos” policy. It was Hatshepsut, wishing to legitimate her rule by relating herself directly to the 12th dynasty tradition, who created the ideological tradition of “vilification the Hyksos.”

²¹ In his evaluation of the Second Intermediate Period, RYHOLT 1997: 18, remarks that “No kings can be shown to have been intentionally excluded from the document.”

²² GARDINER 1905, 14–92; also *KRI* III 15, 8; 15 (I am grateful to Dr. Deborah Sweeney for the last reference).

tal affinity was the worship of “no god but one,” at least by one Hyksos king, Apophis. The Amarna king and the Hyksos king may have shared a genuine *religious otherness*.

Nevertheless, it seems that during the 19th dynasty, the link between Akhenaten’s heresy and the Hyksos’ “transgression” has not yet been made. It is hard to prove that the 19th dynasty story already carried, even implicitly, a comparison between Akhenaten’s beliefs and the religious practices of the Hyksos king, as nowhere is Apophis vilified in the same terminology or tools that were used against Akhenaten throughout the post-Amarna period. It might be that the story recorded a mere historical fact – Apophis worshipped only Seth-Baal, without necessarily being “the first symptom of the Amarna trauma to surface,” as suggested by Assmann.

This genuine affinity, when combined with the later dramatic change in the status of Seth – from a legitimate royal divinity to the “Evil Other” – could have fostered the strong yoking together of the Late period “evil triad” – Amarna Period, Seth, and various ethnic groups: The Hyksos, the Asiatics and finally the Jews. Yet it should be emphasized that such a tie or equation could only have been made in the Egyptian cultural memory during a period when all three elements carried the additional semantic value ‘EVIL’. This could have happened (in the corpus of official repertoire) only after the very end of the New Kingdom, when Seth fell out of favor, as in a hymn to Ramesses VII the king is still called “The rising Ba^{al},” and takes a Seth classifier (CONDON 1978: 13, pl.89, 9).

This alternative reading of the Apophis and Seqenenre’ story implies that the aggregate of ideas at the disposal of Akhenaten in the middle of the 18th dynasty contained the revolutionary option of “*worship of a single god*.” This new, arresting idea was sealed in the New Kingdom’s historical memory as



Fig. 1 Tell el-Dab^a Inv. Nr. 5440 (Drawing Ch. Mlinar)

part of the multi-layered memories of the rule of the Hyksos. Akhenaten may have embraced the “embryo” Hyksos idea, then chose another god to worship – an Egyptian divine entity (Fig. 1),²³ the Aten, and carried it to new horizons of piety, speculation, and intellectual contemplation, forever changing the history of religion.

Should this reconstruction be correct, the kernel of the phenomenon that Assmann named “The Mosaic distinction” (ASSMANN 1997: 1–6), which he claims should be attributed to the Egyptian King Akhenaten, not to the unhistorical “Moses” (i.e. the Israelites), may indeed be attributed to a shadowy Hyksos king, named Apophis. This Asiatic king who ruled by the end of the Hyksos era (circa 1565–1540) may have, at some point during his reign, out of unknown reasons²⁴ – either political or religious – made the Seth-Ba^{al} a single god to be worshiped in his capital Avaris. By this act, he was the first to introduce into the history of ideas, the option of a “single god and no other,” the first step on the long winding road of monotheism that passed through the fields of Amarna and ended in the accomplished monotheism of the post-exilic Biblical text.²⁵

²³ This scarab was uncovered in the excavations in Tell el Dab^a stratum F. The upper part has an image that may be a reminder of the Aten’s image. In her elaborate dissertation on the scarabs from Tell el-Dab^a CH. MLINAR writes: “Als Einzelperscheinung muß auch die Art der Darstellung der Sonnenscheibe mit Strahlen gelten, kein anderes Beispiel ist dafür bekannt” (2001: 136).

²⁴ Was the plague the reason for this change?

²⁵ There is no correlation between the issue of “the ethical god” and monotheism. Polytheistic religion may show different gods that possess “ethical” concerns, and a monotheistic belief could be devoid of ethical concerns. The god of Amarna has very limited ethical characteristics. On biblical monotheism, see HOFFMAN 1994.

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