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THE SACRED ANIMAL OF THE GOD SET

BY

AD. S. JENSEN



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As will be known, the monuments of ancient Egypt are decorated with inscriptions and images of gods, humans and animals. The gods are frequently represented in human shape. However, the Egyptians entertained the creed that the gods were able to incarnate themselves into various animals. Therefore, they often depicted their gods as animals or gave them a human body with an animal head. Thus HORUS, the sun-god, carries the head of a falcon, the god SOBEK the head of a crocodile, the god ANUBIS the head of a jackal, the goddess BAST the head of a cat, the god THOTH the head of an ibis, the god KNUHM the head of a ram, and so on.

As a rule, it is easy to identify the various animal forms. But Egyptologists are not yet agreed as to the identification of the animal head characterizing SET, one of the most ancient gods of Egypt, son of GEB, the earth god, and NUT, the goddess of the sky. SET was much worshipped in ancient times; he is often depicted in association with the god Horus, the two crowning the king of Egypt with the double crown (fig. 1), subjecting him to the pertinent ceremonies of purification, or teaching him the use of different weapons (fig. 2). But according to the myth, Set was hostile to OSIRIS, his own brother, who bestowed on the Egyptians the blessings of culture; he murdered him, and scattered his dismembered body to the winds. SET also tried to destroy HORUS, Osiris'

son, but helped by his mother Isis, Horus escaped from Set's persecutions and commenced war against his father's murderer. Set was expelled, and Horus became the sole

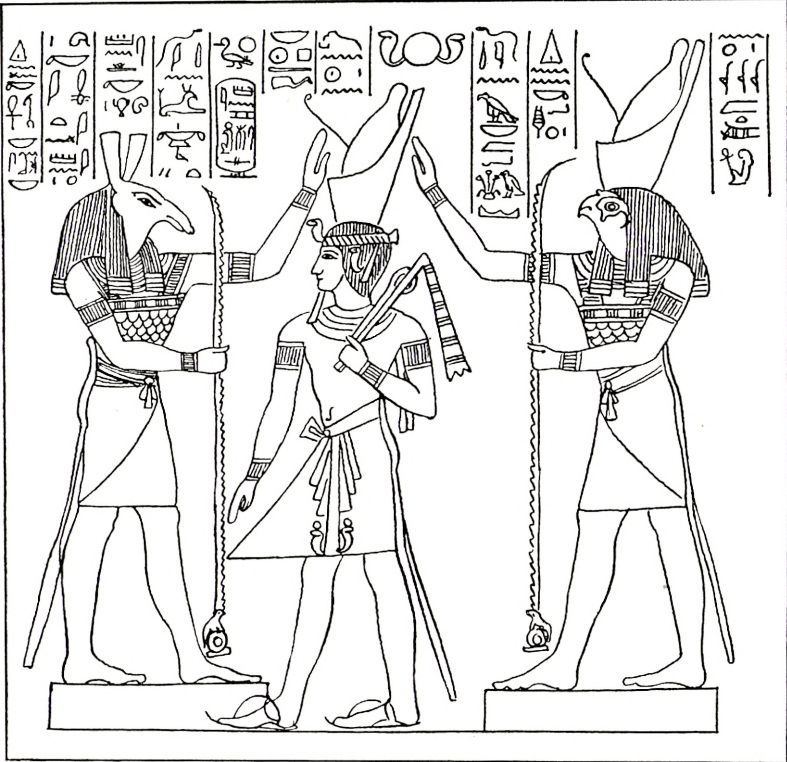


Fig. 1. Set (to the left) and Horus (to the right) in the act of placing the double crown of the South and the North upon the head of Ramses II.
After Lanzone¹, Pl. CCCLXXIV.

ruler of the country. Set however was not entirely destroyed, but was driven out into the desert; as god of the desert he still threatens to penetrate into fertile Egypt and devastate it.

However, Set's malicious character did not prevent him

¹ Dizionario di Mythologia Egizia, p. 1139, Torino, 1881—86.

from being worshipped as a deity; sacrifices were made to him out of fear, for he was a powerful and mighty being, who might be extremely dangerous to the other gods and to man. Not until the Asiatic Hyksos had settled down in Egypt, had identified Set with their principal god and honoured him on their monuments, did the antipathy to his evil aspect preponderate over fear. And when the barbarians had been expelled, Set was gradually degraded in the conception of the Egyptians. Set's name eventually came to embody all evil things, whether material or intellectual, and he was persecuted by the deletion of his image from the monuments¹. Statues and statuettes of Set are therefore extremely rare.

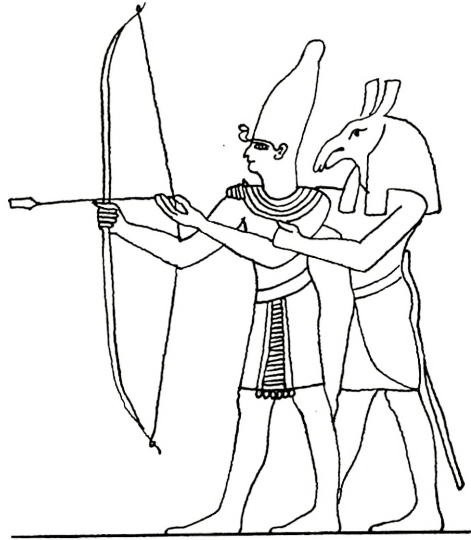


Fig. 2. Set teaching Thotmes III the use of the bow. After Lanzone, Pl. CCCLXXVI.

The uncertainty with which Egyptologists face the problem of the animal head which Set wears is clearly borne out by the summary given in 1928 by Professor PERCY E. NEWBERRY on the question, quoted here²: "On the Former Identifications of the Cult-animal of Set".

"The identification of this animal has long been a puzzle

¹ Cf. A. WIEDEMANN: *Die Religion der alten Ägypter*, p. 117, Münster i. W., 1890. — H. O. LANGE: *Ægyptisk Religion*, pp. 52, 60; *Illustreret Religionshistorie*, København, 1924.

² *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, Vol. XIV, p. 223, London, 1928.

to Egyptologists. Many scholars have held to the opinion that the creature was a purely imaginary one, that it was, like the Sphinx or the Griffin, a compound animal. This opinion was held by CHAMPOLLION (Not. descr., 360), ROSELLINI (Mon. civ., II, 218), LEPSIUS (D., Text, IV, 778), BORCHARDT (Zeitschr. f. äg. Spr., XLVI, 90), ROEDER ("Set" in Roscher's *Lexicon der griech. und rom. Mythologie*, III, 1165 sq.), and BÉNÉDITE (*Journal*, V, 227). PLEYTE (*La religion des Pré-Israélites*, 1862, 187) thought that it was a degenerate form of an ass, but later (*Quelques monuments relatifs au dieu Set*, Leyden, 1863) he suggested that it might be an oryx and this seems also to have been at one time the opinion of HEINRICH BRUGSCH (*Religion und Mythologie der alten Aegypter*, 1890, 703, 786), although the latter scholar had earlier (Wb. 1422) suggested that it was a greyhound. ERMAN (*Handbook of Egyptian Religion*, 20) remarked that "the animal by which Set is represented, or whose head he wears, was considered in later times to be a donkey, although at least it could only have been a caricature of one. Probably it was intended for some animal with which the Egyptians of historical times were not familiar". MAX MÜLLER (*Egyptian Mythology*, 1918, 102—3) suggested that it may have been derived from "an animal which had, perhaps, become extinct in prehistoric times, or that the figure of it had been drawn from an archaic statue of so crude a type that it defied all zoological knowledge of subsequent artists." BÉNÉDITE (*Journal*, V, 227) seems to have had a suspicion that, although the Set-animal was an imaginary creature, it merely "replaced a real one which very early disappeared from the Egyptian horizon, or else subsisted but was unrecognized". MASPERO (*Dawn of Civilisation*, 1895, 103, 108) thought that it might be the fennec

or the jerboa. WIEDEMANN (Religion, 1897, 117, 221) remarks that the head bears some resemblance to a camel's head, but later (O. L. Z., V, 220, and Umschau, 1902, 1002) he identified the animal with the okapi, and in this identification he has been followed by EDUARD MEYER (Hist. de l'antiquité, II, 1914, 86), BREASTED (History, 1920, 32), and GAILLARD (Bull. de la Soc. d'Anthropologie de Lyon, XXII, 1903). THILENIUS (Rec. trav., XXII, 216) considered that it represented the long-snouted mouse (Macroscelides). LEFEBVRE (Sphinx, II, 63—74) identified it with "un chien, et plus spécialement un lévrier," and LORET (Proc. Soc. Bibl. Arch., XXVIII, 1906, 131; cf. Bull. de l'Inst. franç. du Caire, III, 20) says "un lévrier d'un genre tout spécial." SCHWEINFURTH (Umschau, 1913, 783; Ann. Serv., XIII, 272) thought that it might be the Aard Vark (*Orycteropus aethiopicus*). VON BISSING suggested a giraffe (Rec. trav., XXXIII, 18). In 1912 (Klio, XII, 401) I noted that it certainly belonged to the pig family, and that it was possibly the Wart Hog. In 1917 (Ancient Egypt, 1907, 44) I again stated my belief that it must be a pig of some kind. DARESSY had come to much the same conclusion in 1917 (Bull. Inst. franç. du Caire, XIII, 89 ff.) but he identified the animal with the Wild Boar of Europe (*Sus scrofa*)."

It may further be mentioned that the Set-animal has been considered to be a hare and a jackal or a tapir, although the latter is non-existent in Africa; it has been thought to be a member of the dog family (Canidae), which was very rare and later became extinct; and it has been identified with the long-snouted mormyr of the Nile (*Mormyrus oxyrhynchus*) and with the nḥ-bird of the Egyptians. It has been alleged, too, that the animal is merely a fantastic design to symbolize the evil aspect of the deity.

Newberry in his summary does not mention a paper by the present author, which is understandable as it is written in Danish and appeared in a popular periodical¹.

This paper was called forth by the claim of ALFRED WIEDEMANN, the Egyptologist², that the strange giraffe form okapi (*Ocapia Johnstoni*) had served as a model for the head of the god Set, an interpretation of which he further explains the motives³, and which gained wide publicity and was approved of and included in both scientific and popular papers.

One of my objections to this hypothesis was that the Egyptians could not have been familiar with the okapi. It is true that they knew various animals which became extinct at an early period in the narrow tracts of cultivated land in the valley of the Nile or belonged to more southern districts with which they were in business communication; from the earlier part of the history of Egypt, pictures of ostriches, rhinoceroses and elephants are found. But it is too unlikely that the Egyptians knew the okapi, which lives in the most inaccessible thickets of Central Africa, so well hidden that it was not discovered until the beginning of our century. And there is no evidence that in historic times the primeval forest extended farther towards the valley of the Nile than now.

Furthermore, there is a special feature of the head of the god Set which is not found in the okapi, viz. the square

¹ ADOLF S. JENSEN: Okapi'en og Guden Set. Maanedts-Magasinet, pp. 825—830. København, 1909.

² A. WIEDEMANN: Das aegyptische Set-Tier. Orientalistische Litteratur-Zeitung, 5. Jahrg., pp. 220—223, Berlin, 1902.

³ WIEDEMANN premises the following remark regarding his previous view of the problem: "Ich selbst hatte an ein stylisiertes Kameel oder an eine Beeinflussung des Ideogrammes durch das Bild der Giraffe gedacht" (l. c. p. 220).

ears. As this feature is found in all images of Set, it cannot be considered accidental. And what should make the Egyptian designers and sculptors conventionalize just this animal's ears, as suggested by Professor WIEDEMANN, when otherwise they endeavoured to represent their models as true to life as possible.

Some years later Professor SCHWEINFURTH too maintained¹ that the geographic distribution alone is against the conception that the okapi, living in the distant forests of Congo, should have been the model for the god Set. At the same time Professor Schweinfurth believes that in the African aard-vark (*Orycteropus aethiopicus*), of which, according to the evidence, the Egyptians have had some knowledge, he has found the animal in which the features characterizing the image of Set are combined. At the same time Schweinfurth states that already ISAMBERT and CHAUVET indicated the aard-vark as consecrated to Set. But here too we meet with difficulties preventing the acceptance of this view; among other things the ears of the aard-vark are not — as Professor Schweinfurth writes “am Ende breite”, but pointed.

Professor Wiedemann must be said to be right in his statement that “ein rechtwinkliger, flacher, oberer Ohrabschluss findet sich überhaupt bei keinem uns bekannten Tiere . . .”². None of the animals suggested have such ears; neither the jumping shrew (*Macroscelides*), the hare, the jerboa, the aard-vark, the dog, the jackal, the fennec, the ass, the

¹ G. SCHWEINFURTH: Das Tier des Seth. Annales du Service des Antiquités de l'Égypte, Tome XIII, pp. 272—276. Le Caire, 1914.

² Later R. O. FAULKNER expresses the same opinion when he writes: “The greatest obstacles to satisfactory identification are the ears and the tail, which belong to no animal known to science, for the former are square-ended . . .” (The god Setekh in the Pyramid Texts; Ancient Egypt, 1925, p. 5). As regards the tail see the present paper page 14.

tapir, the wild boar, the wart hog, the camel, the giraffe, the okapi nor the oryx. But on the other hand, in all images of the Set-animal the ears are persistently erect, stiff, flatly cut off at the top; this feature together with the long-snouted part of the face, ending in a narrow muzzle with protruding upper lip makes Set easily recognizable. It might be tempting to follow some authors in referring the Set-animal to the world of fable; but opposed to this we have the



Fig. 3. Head of the god Set. After Lanzone, Pl. CCCLXX.

fact, often emphasized, that the other animals into which the gods incarnate themselves are actually existing beings and not imaginative.

In my above mentioned paper I proposed an identification which attacks the problem from a new angle; the passage in question reads as follows:

“One day when I was contemplating a picture of the head of the god Set (fig. 3) the thought suddenly struck me that the so-called “ears” are much more like the two small horns, which the giraffe carries on the crown of its head; these bony processes, covered with short-haired skin, are actually as it were cut off or square at the top (fig. 4)¹. It is true that the processes are disproportionately large on the Set-head, but the

¹ As mentioned above, not only the isolated occurrence of the okapi prevents its identification with the animal head of Set, but also the fact that the horns of the okapi (which are only found in the male) are not square at top, but conically pointed.

Egyptian artists were apt to exaggerate some characteristic feature or other in their models, for instance they represent the horn of the rhinoceros much larger than it actually is. The place where the horns are situated is correct too. But — it might be objected — the giraffe has also ears behind the horns, these however are not to be seen on the head of Set. They are not, and for the simple reason that the back of the head and the neck are covered with a wig or a head-dress, of the kind usually worn by the Egyptians by way of protection against the scorching rays of the sun. Other Egyptian gods too carry horned animal heads, and on these the horns sometimes appear alone, while the ears are covered with the head-dress (see fig. 5)¹. There is further a striking



Fig. 4. Head of giraffe.

similarity as to details between the head of the god Set (fig. 3) and that of the giraffe (fig. 4)²: the long narrow part of the face bent downward and the prolonged upper lip; the low process in front of the horns, which corresponds to the unpaired osseous process on the forehead of the giraffe; the eyes looking “languidly” down under pro-

¹ On statues and images with human heads the ears are also frequently hidden under a head-dress or a wig.

² It is not unnatural that Professor WIEDEMANN found similarity between the head of the okapi and that of the god Set; as a link in the evolutionary series of the giraffe group, the okapi possesses some of the same peculiarities which characterize the most highly developed genus of the group, the giraffe.

jecting brows, just as in the giraffe which carries its head so high that it has grown accustomed to turn its glance downward and has developed a projecting edge above the socket."

And if we agree to consider the giraffe as the model for the god Set, the Set-myth is seen on the proper background. The home of the giraffe is the grassy plains with detached tree-groups, nor does it avoid districts generally designated as "deserts"; there are giraffes living in Kalahari for instance, as well as on the dry plains of Senegambia, Sudan



Fig. 5. Head of the god Khnum. After Lanzzone, Pl. XLVI.

and Kordofan. The giraffe might therefore very well in very early times have ranged farther north than nowadays, when Nubia forms the northern limit of its occurrence. Originally, it might also have occurred in Egypt, but in the long run such a large animal could not subsist in a place to which farming people immigrated. Gradually as the soil was cultivated, it was forced back, first from the fertile tracts towards the boundary of the desert. During the time when the giraffe still subsisted there, and probably fled into the desert on account of persecution, the conception gained ground with the ancient Egyptians that the giraffe was the embodiment of infertility and drought. The god Set with whom the giraffe was associated, gradually in the minds of the people came to mean the Ruler of the Desert, and as such he must be hostile to his brother Osiris, who was the god of fertility and civilisation. The myth of the quarrel between the brothers thus aimed at parabling the eternal strife between the desert and the cultivated land, which has gone on in Egypt from the earliest times.

The sign for the god Set in Egyptian texts is as given in fig. 6 a; it shows a human body with the head of a giraffe, on which the horns only are seen, whereas the ears are hidden by the head-dress as explained above. Other signs for Set show the form of an animal, in the erect position (fig. 6 d), seated on its haunches (fig. 6 b) or lying down (fig. 6 c). In this Set-animal the giraffe head is again recognizable, but here it is rather natural, being an animal head without the head-dress, whereby the ears have been eliminated. Now it might be objected that this Set-animal does not bear any striking similarity to a giraffe; but it must be borne in mind that in the very early times, when the Set-image took shape, the knowledge of the appearance of the giraffe was imperfect. In this respect I refer the reader to a paper by WARREN R. DAWSON: *The Earliest Record of the Giraffe*.¹ In this paper it is recorded that the giraffe occurs on the carved ivory objects of pre-dynastic and proto-dynastic age. I reproduce such a figure (fig. 7)², taken from Dawson's paper. The figure, dating from about 3500 B. C., no doubt represents a giraffe although a very primitive one. If the Set-animal (fig. 6 d) is compared with this ancient picture of a giraffe, the striking



Fig. 6. Signs for the god Set. *a* and *f* after Roeder³; *b*, *c* and *d* after Newberry⁴; *e* after Gardiner⁵.

¹ *The Annals and Magazine of Natural History*, Ninth Series, Vol. XIX, pp. 478—485. London, 1927.

² The figure was originally found on a plate published by G. BÉNÉDITE (*The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, vol. V, 1918) showing in photographic reproduction a pre-historic ivory comb with numerous animal figures in relief.

³ *Zeitschr. f. Ägypt. Sprache u. Altertumsk.*, 50. Bd., p. 84. Leipzig, 1912.

⁴ *Klio*, 12. Bd., p. 397. Leipzig, 1912.

⁵ *Egyptian Grammar*, p. 451, E. 21. Oxford, 1927. Cf. also Flinders Petrie, *Ancient Egypt*, 1924, p. 112, 31.

similarity cannot be denied. Finally, a variation of the Set-animal is reproduced in fig. 6 f. Here the head carries three protuberances as in the primitive figure of the giraffe (fig. 7); on comparing this figure with the latter I identify the two anterior processes with the horns, the posterior with the one ear, the other being invisible owing to the profiled view. This figure of the Set-animal (fig. 6 f) appears to me very significant, as it only seems possible to explain



Fig. 7. Carved figure of a giraffe on an ivory comb. About 3500 B. C. After Dawson.

the process "in excess" by a comparison with the horned giraffe.

There is a remarkable feature in the Set-animal, which does not agree with our ideas of the giraffe; its tail ends in a tuft of hair, whereas the tail of the Set-animal is invariably figured as parted at the tip. However, I happened to get hold of a paper by BERTHOLD LAUFER: *The Giraffe in History and Art*.¹ In this paper p. 17 a fragment of a vase from the prehistoric period of Egypt² is reproduced, and this vase bears the image of a giraffe, awkwardly depicted, it is true, but undoubtedly a giraffe, and its tail is actually branched at the tip (fig. 8); the fact that it is tripartite, whereas the tail of the Set-animal is generally bifurcate seems to me a rather immaterial detail; besides on perusal of a good deal of Egyptological literature I found some images of the Set-animal, on which its tail is tripartite at the tip (see fig. 6 e). Regarding the reproduction of the tail, conformity also exists between the giraffe-figure of those

¹ Field Museum of Natural History, Department of Anthropology, Leaflet Number 27, Chicago, 1928.

² The figure is reproduced from JEAN CAPART: *Primitive Art in Egypt*, fig. 96, London, 1905.

times and the figure of the Set-animal. It is true that the Set-animal carries its tail in an erect position, whereas giraffes in zoological gardens have pendent tails. But from films showing giraffes in the open, it may be seen that their tails swing upwards when they are running. It may also be that the tail is depicted in an erect position from considerations of space.

Regarding the ancient reproductions of the giraffe in fig. 7 and fig. 8 it is conspicuous that both neck and limbs are too short, and the same fault is repeated in fig. 6 in the sign for the Set-animal. This might be explained in the way that the hunters who killed giraffes took with them the cut-off heads as a trophy, while the remaining colossal body had to be left behind, and the reproductions of body and limbs, therefore, have become less true to life than those of the head.

There is another objection which might perhaps be made to the identification given here, viz. that there exist Egyptian representations of the giraffe giving a far better picture of the actual appearance of the giraffe than the above mentioned reproductions. But in respect to this objection I should like to offer the following remarks: The original picture of the Set-animal dates from antiquity, when the knowledge of the giraffe was only slight. Later on the giraffe became far better known;



Fig. 8. Giraffe on a painted vase. After Laufer.

especially when live giraffes were brought by ships' expeditions to Punt (the Somali country) and as tributes from Nubia to the Pharaohs of Egypt (cf. LAUFER pp. 19—24). I reproduce here from DAWSON a beautiful giraffe figure from this period, about 1500 B. C. (fig. 9)¹. But even in much older figures the giraffe is depicted with a long neck and long legs, cf. DAWSON l. c. fig. 11. Despite the better knowledge of the giraffe the Egyptians did not think of

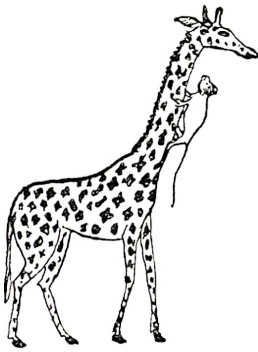


Fig. 9. Picture of a giraffe, in the tomb of Rekhmere; a baboon is clinging to the under surface of its neck. About 1500 B. C. After Dawson.

“improving” the animal form of Set. As H. O. LANGE writes in his treatise “Ægyptisk Religion”², in their religious conceptions the Egyptians showed an amazing conservatism and adherence to all that bore the sanctity and mark of age; they never discarded the old things, not even when out-of-date or transformed by innovations.

The persistent adherence of the Egyptians to the original type of the god Set may in my opinion be explained by and taken as an example of this veneration for survivals.

It should further be added that in the essential thing, i. e. the identification of the Set-animal with a giraffe, there is at any rate one subscriber to my opinion, viz. Freiherr W. von BISSING³, the German Egyptologist; on regarding the above mentioned giraffe image (fig. 8) on an archaic vase reproduced by Capart, von Bissing, without knowing my paper

¹ Cf. also DAWSON's figures 6, 8 and 9 (l. c.) and LAUFER's figures 6, 7, 8 and 9 (l. c.).

² L. c. p. 42.

³ Recueil de Travaux relatifs à la Philologie et à l'Archéologie Égyptiennes et Assyriennes, XXXIII, 3. Série, Tome I, Fasc. I—II, p. 18, Paris, 1911.

of 1909, briefly stated in 1911 that it had almost become a certainty to him, that the Set-animal is a conventionalized giraffe. His grounds are in extenso as follows: "Die archaische Kunst stellt dies Thier, z. Th., im Gegensatz zur Wirklichkeit mit 2 langen, nach oben sich verbreiternden Hörnern¹, einem spitzen Maul, dickem, nicht besonders langem Hals, dünnen Beinen und einem langen Schwanz dar, der sich pfeilartig in drei Teile teilt. Die Ähnlichkeit dieses Girafenbildes mit dem Seththier ist in der That unläugbar und scheint mir grösser als mit irgend einem der sonst vorgeschlagenen Thiere."

GÜNTHER ROEDER agrees to the above view, since he writes: "von Bissings Verweis auf die Zeichnung eines mittelprähistorischen Gefässes rückt in der Tat Giraffe und Settier nahe zusammen." But at the same time ROEDER is of opinion that there are features which militate against a complete identification of the giraffe with the Set-animal².

In concluding my comments on the Set-animal, I submit them to the judgment of the proper experts, the Egyptologists. If in my capacity of zoologist I venture to publish this brief investigation, it is due to encouragement on the part of Dr. H. O. LANGE, who has kindly perused my manuscript, and to whom I am likewise indebted for having called my attention to several papers on the god Set, which I should hardly have been able to trace without assistance.

¹ What is here described as horns are actually the animal's ears, cf. fig. 8 in the present paper.

² G. ROEDER: Der Name und das Tier des Gottes Set. Zeitschr. f. Ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde, 50. Bd., p. 84, Leipzig, 1912.

Post Scriptum.

Mr. OTTO KOEFOED-PETERSEN, M. A., Curator, Ny Carlsberg Glyptothek, has kindly called my attention to the following passage in the German Egyptologist H. BRUGSCH's "Reiseberichte aus Aegypten" (Leipzig 1855), p. 176: "Aus den vielen Darstellungen, womit die Umgebung der Cella geschmückt ist, greife die des Gottes Nubi¹ auf dem grossen Gange von Osten nach Westen² heraus. Hierin schiesst der typhonische Gott³ der Herr Nubiens mit einer nur selten auf ägyptischen Monumenten anzutreffender Gestalt (Kopf der Giraffe) Pfeile ab, und lehrt dem jungen König Thutmes die Kunst des Treffens"⁴.

This remark of Brugsch seems to have been quite overlooked, cf. for instance the summary given by NEWBERRY in 1928 on the interpretations of the enigmatic Set-animal, reproduced in the present paper p. 6, and in which another opinion is ascribed to Brugsch.

The facts are however as follows:

In his later work "Hieroglyphisch-Demotisches Wörterbuch", 4. Bd., p. 1422 (Leipzig, 1868), BRUGSCH connects the animal of Set with the dog or an animal resembling the dog, and still later in "Religion und Mythologie der alten Ägypter" (Leipzig 1891) p. 703 Set is said to carry the head of an oryx. But later, in the last mentioned book (p. 714) BRUGSCH writes: "Die Darstellungen zeigen den Gott Seth in der Gestalt eines schreitenden Mannes mit dem Kopfe des ihm geweihten Thieres, in welchem ich nicht umhin kann eine Giraffe zu erkennen, obwohl die gewöhn-

¹ Nubi (Nubti) = he from the town Ombos = Set.

² In the big Karnak temple.

³ = Set.

⁴ This scene is reproduced in the present paper, fig. 2.

liche Erklärung sich für den fabelhaften Oryx entscheidet." In this place BRUGSCH thus makes reservations with regard to the popular view and reverts to the interpretation set forth by him 36 years ago.

Thus BRUGSCH seems to be the first to connect the giraffe with the Set-animal, although discretionarily, without further argumentation.

BIOLOGISKE MEDDELELSER

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