

# Demons in Ancient Egypt

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## Abstract

While much has been written on the topic of deities and the dead in Ancient Egypt, the systematic study of demons has only recently come to the fore of scholarly studies. Preliminary typologies based on surviving spells, prescriptions, and apotropaic devices suggests the theory that these hostile entities were divided into sub-types in the Egyptian worldview, distinguished from each other by the specific illnesses and conditions they caused, and as well as by the prescribed means of repulsion and protection. Along with hostile demons, a related category of benevolent genii can be discerned. This paper presents an overview of demons and genii in Pharaonic Egypt based primarily on sources from the Middle Kingdom through the New Kingdom.

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## Introduction

The Ancient Egyptian Onomastikon of Amenimopet<sup>1</sup> provides a hierarchical list of six categories within which superhuman beings fall: god (*netjer*), goddess (*netjeret*), transfigured male spirit (*akh*), transfigured female spirit (*akhet*), king (*nswt*), and goddess of kingship (*nesyt*). These groups are first followed by those humans within the royal sphere, then other Egyptians and officials, foreigners, and finally humans divided by age groups. The entities included in encyclopaedic texts such as this are those that were considered to be part of the ordered cosmos while beings of chaos, such as demons, were excluded. Thus, the ancient Greek category of *daimon*, in the sense of a divinity or supernatural being whose nature lies between that of gods and humans, does not have an equivalent counterpart in the Pharaonic Egyptian hierarchy of beings. Nevertheless, while they are not overtly labeled as such, entities that we categorise as demons, in the sense of cruel or hostile entities, did play an important role in Egyptian culture and are manifested in both the textual and material archaeological remains. Furthermore, preliminary typologies based on surviving spells, prescriptions, funerary texts and apotropaic devices suggests that these particular harmful beings can be into distinct sub-types, distinguished from others by the specific illnesses and conditions they caused, and as well as by the prescribed means of repulsion and protection.<sup>2</sup> Beneficial beings whose role was to protect individuals or places can also be distinguished, and will here be referred to as genii, to distinguish them from their hostile counterparts, the demons. All of these beings, as well as the gods and the dead, inhabited the Egyptian afterlife (*duat*) – an area normally inaccessible to the living. However, at certain times the boundary between the two spheres became permeable allowing access for benevolent forces such as the gods, but also hostile entities such as demons to cross over to influence the living.

## Demons

The primary source for our knowledge of demons who caused mischief and harm to humans is the magical spells recorded on papyri and ostraka.<sup>3</sup> In general, the spells

consist of an oral component (recitation), a series of actions or gestures to be performed, and specified ingredients to be used or made. Many of the spells are designed to treat medical conditions, both physical and psychological,<sup>4</sup> or to protect individuals or spaces from earthly and supernatural intruders. Exhorting a series of powerful gods for help is commonplace, and the episodes themselves are placed within a mythological backdrop with the healer often playing the role of the goddess Isis magically healing the patient who played the role of her son Horus. In many cases the deities are urged to confront hordes of invading denizens of the land of the dead: enemies (*kheftyu*), adversaries (*djay*), and unjustified dead (*mut*). These groups were generally referred to as specifically both male and female. There seems no evidence that the female demons were held any more culpable than males, and indeed, there are more instances of only males being mentioned than there are of only females. Although they all inhabited the afterlife their natures varied. The ones that were labeled as enemies or adversaries or simply as the host of dead, were those who had threatened or transgressed against the gods, ones who had not passed the required tests for successful transformation or for whom the proper funerary rituals had not been carried out. They were therefore doomed to eternal punishment and unrest – predisposed to intimidate the living in whatever way they could. These nebulous hordes of hostile dead, adversaries, and generic enemies were blamed for an assortment of problems in lists including Coffin Texts, the oracular amuletic decrees, as well as spells.

That these demonic entities who threatened the living were the same as the ones who were considered as vile enemies of the gods (particularly Ra and Osiris), in the afterlife is emphasised by references to their being reversed. One spell warns that ‘he (the demon) will not go forth face forwards, limbs as sound limbs.’<sup>5</sup> Ritner notes that this posture is compatible with other references to both demons and the enemies of the pharaoh who are twisted with their head facing backwards, unable to see forwards. This posture is also described in other texts such as the ‘Spell for a Mother and Child’<sup>6</sup> to protect the vulnerable individual (in this case a child) against demons that attack in the dark. One lovely spell provides details of how it will invert the disturbing being: ‘I will turn your face into the back of your head, the front of your feet into your heels.’<sup>7</sup> The representation of demons as being physically reversed and deformed applies not only to the generic hordes, but to the few named demons as well. One of the rare spells to name a specific individual demon, in this case *Sehaqeq*, notes that he ‘has come forth from the sky and the earth, whose eyes are in his head, whose tongue is in his anus, who eats buttock-loafs, his right forelimb turning away from him, his left forelimb crossing over his brow, who lives on dung, whom the gods in the necropolis fear!’ Although demons are rarely visually depicted, a headrest now in Cairo depicts just such a cowering demon under attack by the arrows of the goddess Neith.<sup>8</sup>

In similar fashion, the enemies of the gods and the unjustified dead could be forced to live a reversed life in the *duat*.<sup>9</sup> Those who were not instantly relegated to the second death were condemned to a variety of indignities, tortures that might include living a life incompatible with maat, upside down, inside out, with even their digestion reversed: in Egyptian terms eating their own faeces and drinking their own urine. When they are depicted in the afterlife, they appear bound and disabled in various ways both in image, as well as in texts via epithets such as ‘the bound ones’ or ‘those who are under the punishing knife.’

In general, these enemies, adversaries, and dead, seemed to be particularly blamed for problems related to possession or invasion of individuals and of spaces and are attested in a number of spells whose purpose was to thwart them.<sup>10</sup> One example, P. Chester Beatty

VI, vs 2,5-9, was designed to prevent any adversaries or dead, who might be within the body of the victim, from killing him,<sup>11</sup>

Oh you who calculates his spell, prominent in the East, to wit any male dead, any female dead, any male enemy, any female enemy, any male adversary, and female adversary, any male *akh*, any female *akh*, any intruder (*aqu*),<sup>12</sup> to wit any passer-by (*swau*), to wit any trembler (*isded*) – in my neighbourhood or as something seen from afar or as a movement of any limb – to wit those living ones, followers of Horus, who are under the supervision of Osiris who, though having grown old, do not die: let the name of this *heka* be known to me which comes for NN born of NN.

This long text continues with many references to Osiris, and ends with using Apep<sup>13</sup> and weapons of fire against the demons.<sup>14</sup> To a much lesser extent bleeding was also attributed to these demons (and in these cases it was associated with miscarriage as opposed to bleeding from wounds). The dead enemies and adversaries were also ones who had were believed to have entered specific parts of the victim's body such as the belly, the head, limbs, eyes, or even the breasts which would cause leakiness, or a particular spot that results in painful swelling. In some cases it was their 'influence' that caused these problems rather than their direct action (though generally, *set-a*, influence, was blamed on the gods themselves).

The dead and adversaries were rarely the cause of fevers, for these were more often attributed to a specific entity known as *nesy*. The semen of the dead was directly indicted in a spell for drinking medicine, but semen of the gods could also be beneficial and was used to fight against the dead and the enemies. Children were thought to be taken away by the male and female dead and enemies rather than any specific entity as was the case in Mesopotamia where the divine demon Lamashtu was held responsible. There is mention of a *baa* which can be interpreted as an illness, or it could possibly refer to a specific demon, who perhaps then could be considered comparable to Lamashtu). Spells for administering medicine and releasing bandages often include injunctions to keep away the adversaries, enemies and dead. In spells for drinking beer, the enemies and the dead are blamed for drunkenness or ill effects that manifest from the inside out, particularly vomiting.

Another large group of demons that were often named in conjunction with the adversaries, enemies, and unjustified dead, was the host of transfigured spirits (*akhu*) – those humans who had succeeded in attaining the afterlife. The irony is that a demon could include an Egyptian who had worked very hard to become an *akh*, one of the blessed dead who were not only allowed unrestrained travel throughout the many regions of the afterlife, but also free passage into the land of the living. A number of spells in the Book of the Dead ensured that this ability would be granted to the transfigured spirit. It seems that these *akhu* or justified dead, who could appear as benevolent ghosts,<sup>15</sup> also had the power and the will to potentially harm the living in the same manner as the generic enemies and unjustified dead with whom they appear. More specifically, these *akhu* are associated with what we would equate with emotional and psychological distress such as nightmares<sup>16</sup> described as things that fall on you in the night, scary things that enter the house, as well as with the mental disorder associated with plague, pestilence, and more rarely fevers.

Smaller more specialised groups of demons include a group known as the *khayty*, a word that has been translated as 'murderers' or 'slaughterers' or perhaps 'demons of darkness',<sup>17</sup> that were deemed one responsible for plague and pestilence, including the 'plague of the year.' Plagues in general were also blamed on the messengers of Sakhmet, the

goddess associated with vengeance and rage and who was responsible for the near total destruction of mankind: 'gods there, demons of darkness (*khayty*) who stand in waiting upon Sakhmet, who have come forth from the Eye of Re, messengers (*weputyu*) everywhere present in the districts, who bring slaughtering about, who create uproar, who hurry through the land, who shoot their arrows from their mouth, who see from afar!'<sup>18</sup> These messengers are usually associated only with Sakhmet while the *khayty*, the demons of darkness, seem to be more often associated with Bastet, the other usually more benevolent feline goddess. Sakhmet also leads the 'wandering demons' (*shemayu*), that appear in many of the texts to infections diseases as do 'passers-by' (*swau*).

One group of demons called *werets*<sup>19</sup> (great ones) are found only in the oracular amuletic decrees.<sup>20</sup> The sphere of influence of these malevolent spirits was restricted to the specific topographical features that they inhabited such as pools, ponds, lakes, hollows, swamps, and hills. The few demonic entities named as individuals in spells included *nesy*, *sehaqq*, and the *samana*-demon. *Apep*, the personification of chaos in the form of a snake, was also identified by name and blamed for a range of afflictions. Finally, there are also numerous spells that do not mention any of these demons. Otherworldly beings were not responsible for all the harm that happened to humans, and the delivery of poison, scorpions nor snakes was not within their purview. Indeed, spells against poison and poisonous creatures constitute the largest category of spells by far, and the cause was usually the scorpions or snakes themselves, whose poison itself was usually equated with fire.

### Genies

A number of entities that appear in funerary literature such as the Coffin Texts, Book of the Dead, and the New Kingdom Royal Books of the Afterlife, may appear at first glance to be demonic. These supernatural beings are often depicted as knife wielding animals or hybrids of animals. They rarely have names but instead are known by epithets that describe their nature as potentially hostile and even lethal. A sample of the many examples includes: 'Swallower of Shadows,' 'Big and Fiery,' 'Bellowing,' 'The Rapacious One,' 'He whose face is hot,' and the lengthy 'god who lives on meat-sacrifice, dog-faced, human-skinned, keeper of the bend of the waterway of fire, who swallows shadows, who snatches hearts, throws the lasso and yet is not seen.' They are often called *netjer*, the Egyptian word for god, thus emphasising their identity as one of those who inhabit the afterlife, but they are clearly not in the same category as the major gods who have names and cults. Although their natures were ferocious, they should not be considered as demons in the sense of entities hostile to humans, for their role was specifically to protect and guard the gods and the sacred spaces, routes, passages, and doorways of the afterlife. Like any security guard, they allowed access to restricted zones only to those who belonged – the gods and the justified dead. It was only against those who did not belong or who did not have the appropriate knowledge against whom they targeted their weapons and wrath. In this sense, they are more appropriately considered as genii or guardian spirits.

These genii, fully armed with traditional weapons such as knives, spears, and daggers as well as rearing<sup>21</sup> cobras, also helped to guard humans on earth from those demons who have come over to assault them from the afterlife. In these cases their power could be activated by carving or drawing their images onto apotropaic devices. Some of these artefacts were specifically designed as magical implements to protect vulnerable individuals. An example of these are the magical rods and boomerang shaped 'wands' that were prevalent during the Late Middle Kingdom.<sup>22</sup> The latter were made of hippopotamus tusk

and were decorated with carved images of these protective genii, as well as occasionally with a name (usually the 'mistress of the house' or a male child) or with a brief explicit formula such 'we shall guard in the night and the day.' These were likely used during and just after childbirth to draw a protected circle around the mother and child enclosing the vulnerable individuals within a sanctified zone that demons feared to breach. The genii also appeared on more common household objects such as headrests which could be carved with spells expressing wishes for a peaceful and calm sleep. At least one example of a spouted vessel has also been found painted on the outside with a parade of powerful and apotropaic genii<sup>23</sup> of the same type as the decorated hippopotamus tusks, birth rods and headrests, who would have protected the contents of the vessel thus safeguarding the health of the child as well.<sup>24</sup>

### Conclusion

Through the New Kingdom and well into the Third Intermediate Period, demons and deities seem to have been grouped as two categories that in the Egyptian worldview were distinct, but that nevertheless were on the same continuum in terms of being inhabitants of the beyond. Lucarelli notes that from the Late Period onward, and especially in the Graeco-Roman period, this distinction becomes increasingly blurred.<sup>25</sup> Hints of this diffusion can already be seen in the New Kingdom in magical papyri that blame a variety of ailments on the 'messengers of Sakhmet,' thus obliquely assigning this goddess the role of controller of demon. But it is not until the Late Period that this alliance between gods and demons becomes both explicit and endorsed by more formal means. An example can be seen in the deity Tutu, who was particularly worshipped in the Graeco-Roman Period with his own temple cults, yet whose characteristics were that of a demon and one of his formal epithets was that of 'Master of Demons.'<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, some distinctions remain, and while a god such as Seth became increasingly vilified, he never seems to have lost his status as a god, albeit one with a demonic personality himself.<sup>27</sup>

In Ancient Egypt, the anonymous hordes of demons, consisting of the enemies and adversaries of the gods, the unjustified dead and the damned, the hostile transfigured spirits, the specialised groups of demons of darkness, the passers-by, the messengers and wanderers led by Sakhmet and Bastet and those with names such as *shaqeq* and *samana*, who inhabited the afterlife along with the gods were able to step through the permeable membrane between the worlds and attack as marauders physical afflictions as well as emotional disorders related to possession or invasion of individuals and of spaces. The function of many spells was to create a sacred safe protected space which the demons would have to pass-by, ensuring that they were not allowed entry. Those that penetrated this defensive perimeter were greeted by ruthless counterattacks directed by the gods as well as savage genies armed with an array of weapons. Spells were designed to instruct the beleaguered victim with the correct incantations to be accompanied by specific actions as well as whole range of substances that noted as effective physical components against these entities. Some, such as clay objects, garlic, beer, plants, and spit would be readily available to everybody. Other more exotic ones such as the gall-bladder of a tortoise, or pellets of gold presumably would have to be acquired from a specialist. Nevertheless, it is clear that a fear of demons was prevalent in Ancient Egypt, and methods for dealing with them were established and well-known throughout Egyptian history. Recent conferences, publications, major research projects and systematic analyses on the topic of demons in Pharaonic times attests to the wealth of data that has survived and the importance of the study of this phenomenon that had such an impact on the lives of the Egyptians.

## Biography

Dr Kasia Szpakowska is a Senior Lecturer in Egyptology in the Department of Classics, Ancient History and Egyptology and Assistant Director of the *Centre for Egyptology and Mediterranean Archaeology* (CEMA) in Swansea University Wales. She is the author of *Behind Closed Eyes: Dreams and nightmares in Ancient Egypt*, and *Daily Life in Ancient Egypt: Recreating Lahun*, and editor of *Through a Glass Darkly: Magic Dreams and Prophecy in Ancient Egypt*. She currently conducts research on private religious practices in Ancient Egypt and interactions with other cultures of the Late Bronze Age Mediterranean world. Dr Szpakowska holds a British Academy Grant (2009–2010) for her project on *Clay Cobra Figurines of Ancient Egypt and the Levant*, which will culminate in a monograph and database. She is collaborating with European colleagues on a research project and workshops on *The Demonology of Ancient Egypt*. Both of these projects form part of a larger piece of research on *Ancient Egyptian Cults on the Fringe: Religious Interconnections in the Late Bronze Age Mediterranean World*. She has published and continues to work on daily life and gender, focusing on childhood in ancient Egypt. Dr Szpakowska continues to receive invitations and commissions to write chapters in targeted edited volumes, to engage in work on editorial boards, and to lecture at museums, local societies, and for the media.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Gardiner, A. H. (1947). *Ancient Egyptian Onomastica*. London: Oxford University Press.

<sup>2</sup> This paper focusses on those from the Middle Kingdom through the New Kingdom.

<sup>3</sup> Many spells are found on ostraka of clay or stone. For convenient translations see Borghouts (1971, 1978 – *Ancient Egyptian Magical Texts*). (hereafter referred to as AEMT); and Leitz 1999.

<sup>4</sup> Ritner, R. K. (1993). *The Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice*. Studies in Ancient Oriental Civilization, Vol. 54. Chicago: The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.

<sup>5</sup> Ritner, R. K. (1990). O. Gardiner 363: A Spell Against Night Terrors, *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt*, 27, pp. 25–41.

<sup>6</sup> P. Berlin 3027 C1,9–2,6 in Erman, A. (1901). *Zaubersprüche für Mutter und Kind*. Berlin: Abhandlungen der Königl. Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften.

<sup>7</sup> AEMT #3.

<sup>8</sup> AEMT #22. For a similar sketch to this see Schott, S. (1958). Eine Kopfstütze des Neuen Reiches, *ZÄS*, 83, pp. 141–4 or El-Sayed, R. (1982). *La déesse Neith de Sais*. Le Caire: Institut Français d'Archéologie Oriental du Caire, BdÉ, 86, p. 469a.

<sup>9</sup> Descriptions abound in the *Coffin Texts* as well as the New Kingdom Royal Books of the Afterlife such as the *Book of What is in the Duat*, *Book of Gates*, *Book of Caves*, and *Book of the Earth*.

<sup>10</sup> Kousoulis, P. I. M. (2007). Death Entities in Living Bodies. The Demonic Influence of the Dead in the Medical Texts. In: J.-C. Goyon, C. Gardin, (eds.), *Proceedings of the Ninth International Congress of Egyptologists – Actes du Neuvième Congrès International des Égyptologues*. Orientalia Lovaniensia Analects 150, pp. 1043–50. Leuven: Peeters Publishers.

<sup>11</sup> Paraphrased from P. Chester Beatty VI, vs. 2, 5–9 (AEMT #8).

<sup>12</sup> Literally 'ones who enter.'

<sup>13</sup> Apep, usually depicted as a giant serpent, was the representation of chaos that the sun-god had to battle and defeat every night.

<sup>14</sup> AEMT #10.

<sup>15</sup> A levitating ghost is described in P. Chassinat II (Posener, G. 1960. Une nouvelle histoire de revenant. *Revue d'Égyptologie*, 12, pp. 75–82) while the story of Khonsuemhab and the Ghost (for the publication see von Beckerath, J. (1992). Zur Geschichte von Chonsemhab und dem Geist. *Zeitschrift für ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde*, 119, pp. 90–107 and for an English translation Simpson, W. K. Editor (2003). *The Literature of Ancient Egypt: An anthology of stories, instructions, stelae, autobiographies, and poetry*, 3rd edition. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, pp. 112–5) tells the tale of a ghost who is unhappy with the state of his tomb.

- <sup>16</sup> For nightmares see Szpakowska, K. (forthcoming). Demons in the Dark: Nightmares and Other Nocturnal Enemies of Ancient Egypt. In: P. Kousoulis (ed.), *Ancient Egyptian Theology and Demonology: Studies on the Boundaries Between the Divine and Demonic in Egyptian Magic*. Leuven: Peeters Publishers.
- <sup>17</sup> Borghouts (1978) favours 'murderers,' while Lucarelli (forthcoming) uses 'slaughterers,' and Allen translates as 'night demons' (2005). *The Art of Medicine in Ancient Egypt*. New York/New Haven: Metropolitan Museum of Art/Yale University Press, p. 107). The latter may be suggested as derived from *xAwj* 'evening, first darkness,' (Hannig, R. (2006). *Die Sprache der Pharaonen: Großes Handwörterbuch Ägyptisch – Deutsch (2800-950 v. Chr.)*, Marburger edition. Kulturgeschichte der antiken Welt 64, vol. Hannig-Lexica 1. Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, p. 624) though Hannig suggests a more generic sickness-causing demon for the *xAyty* (p. 623).
- <sup>18</sup> Paraphrased from P. Leiden I346, 1, 1-2, 5 (AEMT #13).
- <sup>19</sup> These entities are also discussed in Zandee, J. (1977). *Death as an Enemy: According to Ancient Egyptian Conceptions*. The Literature of Death and Dying. New York: Arno Press.
- <sup>20</sup> These are late New Kingdom to Third Intermediate Period texts that granted assurances from major deities (particularly the Theban Triad) to keep healthy and guard children from a wide range and variety of harmful forces, occurrences, and entities (Edwards 1960).
- <sup>21</sup> This term is also used by Meeks, D. (1971). *Génies Anges, Démons en Égypte, Sources Orientales, Paris* 8, pp. 17-84.
- <sup>22</sup> Altenmüller, H. (1965). *Die Apotropaia und die Götter Mittelägyptens: Eine Typologische und Religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung der Sogenannten 'Zauberer' des Mittleren Reichs*. München: Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität.
- <sup>23</sup> Perraud, M. (2002). Appuis-Tête à Inscription Magique et Apotropaïa, *Bulletin de l'Institut français d'archéologie orientale*, 102, pp. 309-26.
- <sup>24</sup> Allen (2005), 30-1, object #23.
- <sup>25</sup> Lucarelli (forthcoming).
- <sup>26</sup> Kaper 2003, 28, 122-6.
- <sup>27</sup> te Velde 1977, 138-51.

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