Seth, God of confusion; a study of his rule in Egyptian mythology and religion.
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CHAPTER ONE

THE NAME AND THE ANIMAL OF SETH

I. THE NAME OF SETH

Many different forms of the name of Seth occur in the Egyptian texts.¹ In the texts of the pyramids, except in the Unas pyramid, it is written: stḥ.² In the Unas pyramid the name is written only with the so-called Seth-animal, lying down.

Afterwards also, the name may be written with the Seth-animal alone, lying down or seated or with a seated god with the head of the Seth-animal.³ These signs may be supplemented or replaced as in the Pyramid texts by one-letter signs, not always the same ones. The first letter is usually ṣ, less often s. Whenever the ṣ or s is written, the t is written also. Other signs show more variation. Often combined with one of the usual determinatives of gods or one of the different forms of the Seth-animal as a more special determinative the various spellings are as follows: stḥ; stḥ; stḥ; ṣ(w)tḥ; ṣḥ; ṣ(w)t(y); st(y); ṣt.⁴

In the course of the history of Egyptian language and script, ṣ, ḥ and ḫ sometimes prove interchangeable.⁵ In group-writing ṣt stands for ṣ and ṭy for t.⁶ Therefore it seems certain that these are all various spellings of the same name. There is no convincing reason to translate ṣt and ṭ(w)t(y) with "it" and "he".⁷ Since the

¹ A survey of the various ways of writing the name Seth in hieroglyphs, employing the textual material gathered for the Berlin dictionary was given by G. Roeder, Der Name und das Tier des Gottes Seth, ZAS 50 (1912), p. 84-86. See also CT V, 337a.

² G. Lefebvre, S. Sauneron, Grammaire de l'égyptien classique, Le Caire, 1953, § 40. An Egyptian word meaning "saliva" may be written as ntḥ, nḥḥ or nḥḥ (WB II, 342, 344, 319). See further: J. Vergote, Phonétique historique de l'Égyptien, Louvain, 1949, p. 64 sqq.

³ A. H. Gardiner, Egyptian Grammar, London, 1957, p. 482; A. Erman, Namägyptische Grammatik, Leipzig, 1933, § 29. For practical reasons the transcription ṣ(w) and ṭ(y) is maintained.

writing $s(t)y$ also appears, $s(w)t(y)$ seems indeed to be group-writing and not to be derived from the name of the locality $s(w)t(y)$.

The suggested distinction between an Egyptian god Seth and a non-Egyptian god Sutekh, supposed to have been absorbed into Seth, has now been abandoned. The group-writings $s(w)t(y)$ seem indeed to be group-writing and not to be derived from the name of the locality $s(w)t(y)$. It seems practical to publish the name $s(w)t(y)$ because it has been so especially in Upper Egypt: in Coptic, Bohairic retains the $t$ while Upper-Egyptian Sahidic reduces the original $t$ or $h$ to $q$. According to the Berlin dictionary the Babylonian rendering of the name was $s(ut)a$. In cuneiform writing $s$ and $t$ may interchange and the Egyptian personal name $s(w)t(y)$ was pronounced as Suta. The vowel $e$ may have evolved from $u$. It is not known however when the $u$ passed into $e$. The Greek renderings of Egyptian royal names from the 19th dynasty composed with the name Seth do not show the $u$. Just as the way of writing is not uniform but has

variants, the pronunciation to time and place. The name $s(w)t(y)$ has been Sutekh evolved, etymological derivation may have been rendered the name may have been.

2. THE MEANS.

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variants, the pronunciation will also have been different according to time and place. The harder Lower-Egyptian pronunciation may have been Sûtékh evolved to Sêtek; the Upper-Egyptian pronunciation may have been Sût, evolved to Sêt. The h in the modern rendering of the name Seth might be reminiscent of the Coptic ȝ. It seems practical to maintain in this book the long established rendering that follows the Greek: Seth.

2. THE MEANING OF THE NAME SETH

The explanations of the name given in the 19th century under the influence of the famous theory that religion and belief in gods arose from language and a disease of language are now outdated; indeed they were never valid since at that time the letter š was still read as a determinative. 1) The meaning of the name Seth is uncertain by modern etymological standards. 2) For the historian of religion, however, pseudo-etymological explanations of the believers themselves are certainly no less valuable than the etymological derivation. They may have influenced the religious conceptions, and may represent them.

Apparently the explanation given by Plutarch is not his own invention, but goes back to Egyptian tradition. He writes 3):

"And the name ‘Seth’ by which they call Typhon denotes this: it means ‘the overmastering’ and ‘overpowering’ and it means in very many instances ‘turning back’ and again ‘overpassing’." According to Kees 4) this pseudo-etymology derives from late Egyptian interpretations and goes back to an Egyptian word that means “verwirren, zerstücken.” He seems to be referring particularly to Plutarch’s first sense of “overmastering” and “over-

d) ỳ was confused with ȝȝȝȝ.

2) G. Roeder in: Roucher’s Ausführliches Lexikon, vol. IV, col. 727; H. Kees in: PW II, col. 1897; A. Scharff, a.c., p. 44 n. 100.
4) H. Kees in: PW II, col. 1897.
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powering” and the Egyptian words (thh 9) or (tsts 8) or (tS3 6) and (t$ 9) . Thus Kees suggests that the Egyptian etymologists reduced the name Sts or St$ to a verb preceded by an $ . The $ prefixed to a verb usually has a causative value, but sometimes it may confer the force of a declaration or an estimation .

There are two instances of punning with the name of Seth that I know of, and there may be more. These show that the Egyptians themselves were acquainted with this pseudo-etymology, and applied it. The first is of a late period and comes from Denderah: “I have cut $tS$ (meaning Seth, as is evident from the determinative) into pieces (tsts . n . i l35),” (7) The second is older and comes from the Coffin texts: “I have cut the gang of Seth into pieces (tS3 . n . i sm3w$t StS),” (8) In the Coffin text Seth is not written with alphabetic signs but with the ideogram of the Seth-animal, just as in the example from Denderah the spelling of Seth’s name avoids the traditional letters in which one would recognise the verb concerned . Apparently there was a reluctance to ascribe the ominous force of this word to Seth. His essential being is unriddled, but on no account must he be paid homage as “Zerstücker” and so on. The play of words, or rather of letters, is purposely broken up. We cannot enter into a further discussion here of the interesting subject of play upon letters and words. (9) The Egyptians will not have paused to consider the truth of this etymology according to our Western standards. The etymology had to be theologically tenable and true. The unriddling of the name must also unriddle the essence. The

1) WB V, 328, 8 sqq.
2) WB V, 330, 5 sqq.
3) WB V, 329, 17 sqq.
5) A. Mariette, Deuxdreah, description générale du grand temple, Paris, 1873, IV, pl. 80.
6) CT VI, 213.

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2) G. Daressy, Seth et sos anim, 1923.
3) J. Leibovitch, La griffon I, I.
Egyptian theologian will have acknowledged the etymology of the name Seth as instigator of confusion, oppressor or “Zerstückeler” as true, because this explanation agreed with the mythical function of Seth.

Osiris, Seth’s victim, is sometimes called ṭšš h). Allen translates: “the dismembered one”. One may suppose there is some connection between the motive of the “Zerstückelung” in the myth of Osiris and the pseudo-etymology of the name Seth, but it is hard to say which arose from which. Generally speaking, it may be said that punning has fostered the formation and elaboration of myths in Egypt (see the article of Morenz referred to above).

G. Daressy subscribes to the views of the Egyptian pseudo-etymologists, and declares that ṭšš is an apposition: “ce serait ‘celui qui a fait la division, le morcellement’ d’Osiris.” We shall see below that Egyptian representations show there was a close relation between the Seth-animal and the griffin. The name of a griffin with an animal body, wings and a falcon’s head, is ṭšš). Leibovitch has translated this name as: “celui qui déchire, qui met en pièces.”

Our quotation from Plutarch shows that at least two pseudo-etymologies were current, for he also gives “turning back” and “overpassing.” The letters ṭš do indeed offer more than one possibility. ṯšš or ṭš is also “frontier.” Although Seth will appear further on as lord of foreign countries and frontier god, I do not know of any Egyptian speculations that could directly support what Plutarch calls “overpassing.” There is a verb “ṭšš”) that means “to desert,” or something similar, that is: “turning back.” Hayes has carefully examined the meanings of this verb: “In the numerous contexts in which it occurs ṯšš nearly always means “to desert,” “to abandon,” “to be missing” when duty, loyalty or some other obligation, demands one’s presence.” This seems to be what the writers of Coffin texts founded their speculations on. The name Seth is often

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3) J. Leibovitch, *Le griffon 1*, BIFAO 25 (1943), p. 188 and fig. 5.
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replaced in the Coffin texts by the \( \text{S} \) sign,\(^1\) which can be translated as "to separate." By writing Seth with the \( \text{S} \) sign, one could avoid confirming Seth in writing as the instigator of confusion, the "Zerstücker" and so on, and it was also unnecessary to draw the mysterious Seth-animal, which the scribes of the Pyramid texts already avoided, except in the pyramid of Unas. This \( \text{S} \) sign merely characterised him as the one apart, the cause of separation, the deserter. When this writing with the \( \text{S} \) sign fell into disuse, the Egyptians still had the word \( t\text{s} \) to characterise Seth: "He who is pleased with desertion (\( t\text{s} \)) and hates friendship."\(^2\)

These pseudo-etymologies are not confined to the writing \( t\text{s} \), but could also be applied to \( s(w)t\text{s} \). Beside \( t\text{s}\text{ths} \)\(^3\) there is \( t\text{hth} \)\(^4\) and beside \( t\text{sw} \) (Ausgewanderte) there is \( w\text{thw} \) (Flüchtlinge).\(^5\)

From M. A. Murray we learn of a no less interesting pseudo-etymology than those transmitted by Plutarch, but one that is entirely bound up with \( t\text{s} \). She writes:\(^6\) "As the name begins with S, one is inclined to suspect a causative as in the name of the crocodile god Se-bek, 'He who causes to be pregnant'. Se-tekh would then mean 'to intoxicate, to cause to be drunken', and would imply a cult of the same type as that of Bacchus, where drunkenness was regarded as possession by the god." She is clearly thinking of the verb \( t\text{k} \)\(^7\) (to be drunk). Her explanation is obviously only acceptable as a possible rendering of Egyptian priestly speculation, and not as a modern scientific etymology.

According to a papyrus in Leiden,\(^7\) a sick person may be cured by giving him a great deal of beer to drink, for then the demons who are tormenting the patient become fuddled. Seth is represented as the intoxicating power of the beer:

\[ \text{Seth will be restrained by beer (\text{bnkh}).} \]
\[ \text{He confuses the heart to female dead person.} \]

Although here again this case \( \text{Sth} - \text{th} \), he may be that Seth's name is given.

As to the bacchanalia according to Yoyotte\(^4\) of drunkenness and love there is no means of left us a stela on which he was a participant in such is sometimes made to be gift of Seth.\(^8\) According is characteristic of the saying: "If he drinks beer, he will turmoil."\(^9\)

To sum up, the Egyptian has a wider meaning that to the mind of Egyptian priestly given by contained in his name, \( t\text{s} \) de femmes, bien qu'il a toujours prêt à la bagarre, comme la personification.

3. THE EARLIEST REPRESENTATION OF SETH

It is assumed that all is the earliest representa-

1) A. H. Gardiner, \( \text{EG} \), Sign-list Aa 21.
2) \( \text{Urk. VI, 7, 15.} \)
3) \( \text{WB V, 339, 3909.} \)
4) \( \text{WB V, 328, 8900.} \)
5) \( \text{WB V, 329, 14.} \)
6) M. A. Murray, \text{The splendour that was Egypt}, London, 1949, p. 137.
7) \( \text{Pap. Leiden I 348, rt, 13, 4; cf. J. Zanden, Seth als Sturmgott, ZAS 90 (1963), p. 148.} \)

1) Knaurs Lexikon der ägyptischen Kultur.
2) Edfou 1, 469.
4) J. Sainte Fare Garnot, \text{Les statues de Seth.}
"Seth will be irrestrainable, when he wishes to conquer the heart in this his name of beer (an34). He confuses the heart to conquer the heart of the enemy, the evildoer, the male and female dead person."

Although here again the author has not written down the pun, in this case šty—he may well have had it in mind. It is significant, that Seth's name is given as "beer."

As to the bacchanalia assumed by Murray, we can only say that according to Yoyotte 2) Seth and Hathor, the well-known goddess of drunkenness and love, were tutelar god and goddess of wine. There is no means of showing, however, that the Egyptian who left us a stela on which Seth and Hathor are depicted together, 3) was a participant in such Egyptian bacchanalia. A wine-offering is sometimes made to Seth 4) and wine from the Kharga oasis is a gift of Seth. According to the dream papyrus, a craving for drink is characteristic of the Sethian type. Of such a man it is said: "If he drinks beer, he drinks [it so as to engender strife (?)] and turmoil." 5)

To sum up, the Egyptians seem to have attached the following three meanings to the name of Seth: instigator of confusion, deserter, drunkard. As remarked above, the š prefixed to a verb has a wider meaning than the causative. It is not impossible, that to the mind of Egyptian intellectuals the striking characteristic of Seth given by J. Sainte Fare Garnot 6) was in part already contained in his name, and so touched his essence: "Grand amateur de femmes, bien qu'il ait en même temps des moeurs inavouables, toujours prêt à la bagarre et point ennemi du chantage, il apparaît comme la personnification de la violence et de la mauvaise foi."

3. THE EARLIEST KNOWN REPRESENTATIONS OF THE SETH-ANIMAL

It is assumed that an ivory animal figure, found at Mahasna, is the earliest representation of the Seth-animal we know up to the

2) W. M. F. Petrie and J. E. Quibell, Naqada and Ballas, London, 1896, pl. XLIII, 3.
3) P. Montet, La stèle de l'an 400 retrouvée, Kémi 4 (1932-1933), p. 191 sqq., pl. XI.
4) Edjou I, 409.
6) J. Sainte Fare Garnot, La vie religieuse dans l'ancienne Egypte, Paris, 1948, p. 22.