

The *Book of the Faiyum*

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Introduction

The *Book of the Faiyum* is one of the last mythological compositions that the ancient Egyptians wrote in hieroglyphic characters. Based on the large number of preserved manuscripts of this text, it can be said without exaggeration that the *Book of the Faiyum* was one of the “best sellers” of its time. Even more than the sheer abundance of extant texts, the variety within these manuscripts provides for fascinating study. We have magnificently illustrated papyri that are written in hieroglyphs, but we also have hieroglyphic texts without illustrations. We have manuscripts written in Hieratic – an ancient cursive script based on hieroglyphs – and we have manuscripts in Hieratic versions in which the same texts are commented on and explained further in Demotic script – the highly abstracted, cursive writing of the latest ancient Egyptian era.¹ The individual manuscripts also have numerous features and variants as addressed below.

The history of the largest and most splendid of these manuscripts, of which portions are not spread but dispersed in museums in Cairo, Baltimore and New York, is as fascinating as the text itself. When we speak of the *Book of the Faiyum* as a “book,” we are obviously not thinking of a book in the modern sense. Rather, we refer to a roll of papyrus, the typical paper-like writing surface in ancient Egypt. Egyptian scribes wrote on long papyrus rolls that they unrolled on their laps to write and read, then rolled them up

again. It is natural, then, that the section of text that was opened up on the scribe’s lap was no longer than the distance from knee to knee. Just imagine how difficult reading would be for us if our lines of print overlapped several pages!

Normally, an entire Egyptian text was written on one papyrus roll. Not so in the case of the *Book of the Faiyum*. We do not know the circumstances of its discovery, and the individual fragments of the text are now distributed among several museums. Still, it is evident that the text was originally on two papyrus rolls which were deposited together in antiquity. This situation could be compared to a volume combining the first three acts of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* from an edition of 1955 with the last two acts from an edition of 2011. It is clear that the completeness of the contents was desired for the deposit and not uniformity in their construction. The two papyrus rolls differ in format and in the handwriting of the scribes. Such a find of a book in two versions is extremely unusual from ancient Egypt.

Provenance and research history of the *Book of the Faiyum*

The find spot of the text was probably in the Faiyum. We assume this because the contents of the text specifically concern this region to the southwest of

modern Cairo. At the time of the discovery of the papyri in 1859 or perhaps a year earlier, few tourists came to the Faiyum. For this reason, apparently the papyrus rolls were brought to Luxor (ancient Thebes) to be put up for sale. There, in Luxor, and in Nagada, a few miles to the north, they were sold in 1859 in separate pieces to four travelers. Two sections then came to Cairo and were formerly located in the district of the Boulaq National Museum, and became the property of today's Egyptian National Museum, where they are known as Papyrus Boulaq I and II. Other fragments, which first became known when in the possession of Lord Amherst of Hackney, were acquired along with other manuscripts from the Amherst Collection in 1913 for the library of J. Pierpont Morgan. The larger section that had been bought late in 1859 in Nagada by the Englishman Reverend Frankland Hood passed through several hands, eventually ending up in the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore. Today the sections are identified by an abbreviation of the first letter of each first owners' name, B for Boulaq, H for Hood, and A for Amherst.

An exciting discovery was made in 1931 by an Italian archeologist, Carlo Anti (1889-1961), when he unearthed several papyrus fragments that could be assigned to the *Book of the Faiyum* during his excavations at Tebtunis in the Southern Faiyum. Among these was a long Hieratic manuscript of this text, which was then published in 1959 by Giuseppe Botti, an Italian Egyptologist (1889-1968), so that this, together with the *Book of the Faiyum* in Cairo, Baltimore and New York, form the basis for modern-day study of the text. The long text that Botti published is even dated to the day. It was written on September 15, 135 A.D., in the reign of the Roman Emperor Hadrian.

The *Book of the Faiyum* has been the subject of several recent studies. In 1991 the first coherent scholarly work appeared. All texts and illustrations known to date were brought together in one publication. In the meantime, several new manuscripts and fragments have been discovered and a comprehensive publication in several volumes is issued since early 2013.

The manuscript of the *Book of the Faiyum*

The *Book of the Faiyum* in the museums of Cairo, Baltimore and New York (B/H/A) is one of the most magnificently preserved versions of the work. It stands out due to the delicate illustrations and the careful execution of the hieroglyphs. It is always tempting to believe that an ancient artifact that we are working with must be a particularly special piece. So also with the *Book of the Faiyum* (B/H/A). Upon closer inspection of these two papyri, however, serious mistakes can be detected that had consequences for the full completion of the manuscript, and probably had a direct impact on the fate of the manuscript in the ancient world. It must be realized that a papyrus like this was created by several different people, each with his own task. First the raw papyrus material had to be cut and pressed in several stages to form a solid sheet with a smooth writing surface. After the preparation of the scribal materials, the layout of the papyrus was planned. This step entailed the drawing of the boundary lines for the lines of text and for the fields which were to be filled in with illustrations. Then, preliminary sketches were made for the pictures, the text was added, and it was completed with the final drawing of the illustrations.

But the draftsman who prepared the layout of the papyrus (B/H/A) made a couple of fundamental mistakes. In the very first section of the papyrus, he forgot one whole horizontal line, and in doing so, compromised the layout of the rest of the papyrus. In another place, he put in line divisions where an illustration was actually supposed to be inserted, in another place lines were put in the wrong place. The scribe and illustrator following him were no longer able to correct these mistakes, causing them to make additional errors of their own. It appears that this problem-ridden papyrus could no longer be sold. Probably it was then used for another purpose. For the texts copied in Hieratic script, which were written continuously and had no illustrations, the sequence of the texts had to be specified, since this did not follow automatically from the illustrated *Book of the*

Faiyum. For this reason, Demotic numerals were now introduced into the *Book of the Faiyum* (B/H/A), and in two places cryptography (from the Greek *kryptos* = “secret, hidden,” + *graphē* = “writing”) was decoded in normal writing. All of this occurs in the first papyrus but not in the second. How it then happened that the first roll, despite its faults, was put together with the second roll and deposited somewhere is impossible to say. Still, both papyrus rolls would have been quite valuable, even if the quality of the *Book of the Faiyum* (B/H/A) is not as high as another edition that we have in a few fragments in Vienna. But from our point of view today, such minor deficiencies are negligible. Of greater importance here is the preservation and relative completeness of the *Book of the Faiyum* (B/H/A).

The geographical framework

The text of the *Book of the Faiyum* is a so-called “local monograph,” that is, a text that is concerned with a narrowly defined geographic area. Such texts were worked into the inscriptions on the walls of the large temples. One text that could be compared to the *Book of the Faiyum* is preserved on the so-called Papyrus Jumilhac. This is a long papyrus named after its first owner, Comte Odet de Jumilhac (1887-1980), which is concerned specifically with the local religious beliefs of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Upper Egyptian nomes, or provinces. It was written in the same general time period as the *Book of the Faiyum*. The sense of geographical ties is not nearly as strong in the Papyrus Jumilhac as in the *Book of the Faiyum*. To understand the *Book of the Faiyum*, a knowledge of the peculiar geographical situation of the Faiyum is indispensable.

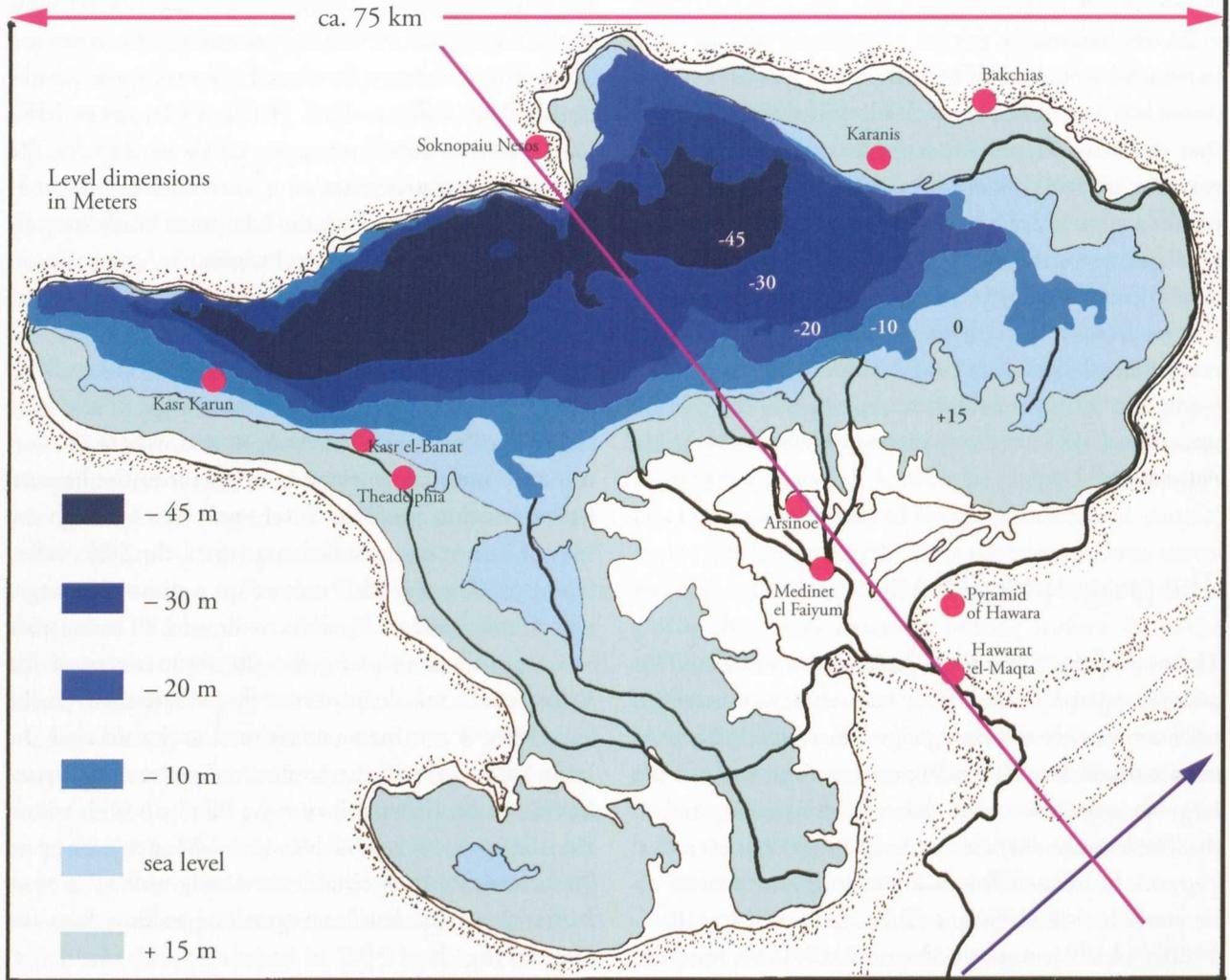
The Faiyum is a region in the Libyan Desert, only a few miles west of the Nile valley. In prehistoric times, this was apparently the site of a mouth of the very ancient Nile that opened into the sea, since fossils of the *Basilosaurus*, a marine cetacean mammal similar to a whale that could grow up to almost 60 feet long, have been discovered around the Faiyum (Wadi el-

Hitan). In historic times, the Faiyum constituted a depression, at the deepest point of which a vast lake, the Birket al-Qarun, stretched (fig. 1). The water table of the lake currently stands at about 135 ft. below sea level. The difference in altitude between the neighboring Nile valley at Beni Suef (+85 ft. above MSL (or Mean Sea Level) amounts to about 233 ft. The average annual precipitation in the Faiyum is about $\frac{3}{8}$ inch. The area including the lake must therefore rely on water channeled in from outside.

The water supply for the Faiyum comes almost exclusively from the Nile. A tributary of the Nile, the Bahr Yusef, which branches off from the Nile in Middle Egypt, flows along the western edge of the Nile valley parallel to the Nile proper and, where the water level is sufficient, empties in part into the Faiyum basin. For this, the Bahr Yusef must flow through the Hawara depression, which separates the Nile valley from the Faiyum. This comprises a narrow passage-way of maximum 3.8 miles, to about 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ miles wide at its most narrow, whereby the watercourse of the Bahr Yusef cuts deeply into the substratum of the soil. Were it not for an additional rocky sill that the Bahr Yusef had to cross over on its way to the Faiyum basin, the basin would soon be filled up with water. But the rocky terrain at Hawara el-Maqtā rises up to 70 ft. above the water table, and only water that rises higher than this level can continue to flow into the Faiyum (fig. 2).

The annual flooding of the Nile brings so much water from its tributaries northwards to Egypt that the provision of water to the Faiyum is essentially no problem. One must be aware, however, that the Nile flood can have varying outcomes. This uncertainty is familiar to us from the story of Joseph in the Bible. Too little water at flood time brings drought, because the water does not reach the farmlands; too much flood water causes destruction. Only since the regulation of the Nile at Aswan through the Aswan High Dam and the regulation of the inflow of water into the Faiyum at el-Lahun, the amount of water flow remains constant. In ancient times, without controlled conditions, the amount of water flow varied depending on the Nile flood, and in years of drought, the in-

Lake of the Faiyum – water levels



Direction of flow of the Nile
= Defined North-South

East-West direction
oriented to the Nile

Fig. 1: The region of the Faiyum is a depression, that is, it lies at a lower level than the water table. The height of the water table is determined on the one hand by the amount of inflow from the Nile, on the other hand by the evaporation of water. There is no meaningful seeping or trickling of water. The water level today is ca. 150 ft. below sea level. Since the towns that flourished at the time when the Book of the Faiyum was written must have been above the water table, it can be calculated that the water level at that time was ca. 100 ft. below sea level.

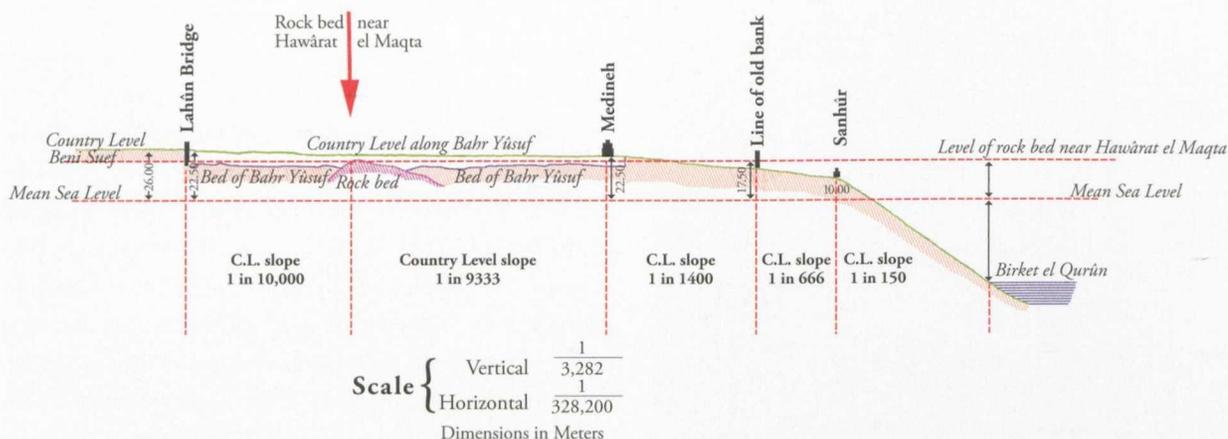


Fig. 2: The water of the Bahr Yusef, which flows from the Nile valley into the Faiyum in the vicinity of Beni Suef, has to rise high enough to overcome the rock bed at Hawara el-Maqa. There, it splits into a number of wide water courses and flows to Medineh (in ancient times, Krocodilopolis/Shedet). From there, it disperses to the fields and, mostly in the form of ground water, reaches the deep-lying Birket el-Qarun (Lake of the Faiyum).

flow could be completely absent. A peculiarity of the Faiyum is that the flood waters did not flow in one watercourse into its lake but rather mainly through small irrigation trenches and groundwater. As long as evaporation and water inflow maintain a steady balance, the water table of the lake does not rise.

From early travelogues of the 17th century we know that the Nile flood in the Faiyum started in August.² Thus it is the hottest time of the year when the largest influx of water comes into the Faiyum. It follows that evaporation of the water in August and September is the greatest. In the time leading up to August, the increasing dryness will have been palpable to the residents in the Faiyum. Then, the flood would be brought on by the rising Nile. The dependency of the Faiyum on the inundation of the Nile valley is thus exceedingly great, and this leaves its mark on the myths in the *Book of the Faiyum*.

A second regional peculiarity must be remarked upon in order to understand the mythology of the *Book of the Faiyum*. The Faiyum lies west of the Nile valley. Egyptian religion perceives the movement of the sun in the sky as coming out of the earth at the Eastern horizon, traveling over the sky and, in

the evening, going back into the earth again at the Western horizon. There it was believed to make an underground passage back to the Eastern horizon where, the next morning, it would be reborn to begin its travels over the sky once again. In this "normal" perception of the course of the sun over the sky, the Eastern and Western horizons are defined by the mountains on either side of the Nile valley. According to this world view, of course, passage of the sun East or West of the Nile valley is inconceivable. This contradiction had to be remedied with a mythology tailored to the desert region west of the Nile valley. It must explain why the sun does not set to the west of the Nile valley, which would be to the east of the Faiyum, but expands its course over the Faiyum. This is a theme of the *Book of the Faiyum*.

Another problem is the path of the sun within the region of the Faiyum. In Egypt, it is only in the Faiyum that we have a lake of any magnitude. Only here is it possible to watch the sun rise and set in the water, and even here only in an ideal position. Correspondingly, it is only here that the nocturnal passage of the sun god from West to East is transferred to the water. According to the religious beliefs in the Nile

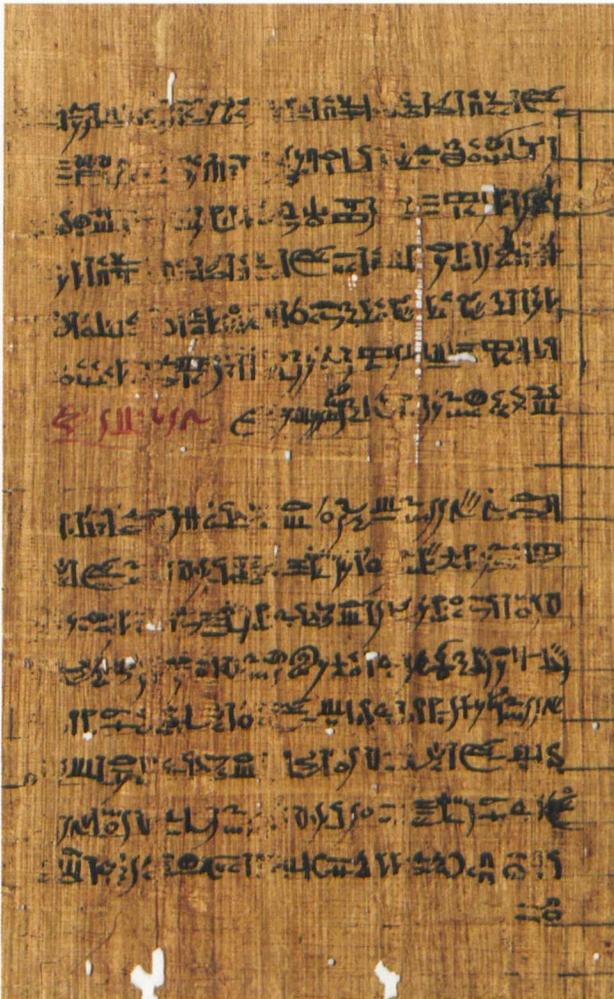


Fig. 3: Papyrus Botti A (Glorificazione di Sobk) with the postscript of the scribe and the date, “20th year of the reign of Emperor Hadrian, first month of summer (= the season of inundation), 8th day”.

valley, the sun travels in the night through a subterranean world of caves until it reaches the exit of the underworld and there is lifted back up in the sky. Not so in the Faiyum. Here, it was believed that the sun takes on the form of a crocodile and swims through the underworld at the bottom of the deep water from West to East, rejuvenating itself in the process. The *Book of the Faiyum* is thus on the one hand a text that presents a myth that is only possible in the environment of the Faiyum; on the other hand, it is a text that has to offer a worthy substitute for the existing myths of the Egyptian heartland.

The age of the *Book of the Faiyum*

The question of the age of the *Book of the Faiyum* B/H/A is a very complex one. In general it is tacitly assumed that both rolls were created at about the same time. There are no dating criteria – such as rulers’ names – on these rolls, which could give us a lead towards a more precise placement. We must therefore expand the inquiry to all of the preserved examples of the *Book of the Faiyum* and ask when specific texts of the *Book of the Faiyum* were written down. Here, there are two secure dates. One is the Papyrus Botti A (see photo in the exhibition), written in Hieratic, in which both the scribe and the recipient of the papyrus are named in the postscript. Here, also the date is given when the copy was made: September 15, 135 A.D. (fig. 3). An additional date can be garnered from the excerpt of the *Book of the Faiyum* that is carved in stone in a corridor in the Temple of Kom Ombo (fig. 4). This corridor is dated to the reign of the Emperor Tiberius (13–47 AD). All the other manuscripts not illustrated were written during the Roman Empire in Egypt.

On the other hand, one finds in the *Book of the Faiyum* references to myths from earlier times, such as the *Book of the Celestial Cow* (see below) or Herodotus’s account of the Faiyum. Such traditions as these from earlier times should also be considered regarding the question of dating. Since the theme of the book is the Faiyum, one historical situation can be considered an impetus for the contemporaneous assembly of a text about its foundation. The water flow to the Faiyum was re-regulated during the early years of the Ptolemaic kings, the Greco-Macedonian successors to Alexander the Great who ruled Egypt. Dams and canals were built, creating dry land for new settlements and temple estates. Since the very existence of an Egyptian temple was based on mythology, all traditions related to the mythology of the Faiyum had to be collected, studied and arranged. This task probably lay in the hands of the “House of Life” in the Faiyum, an institution that existed in many places in Egypt and which was committed, among other things, to preserving and conserving religious traditions and

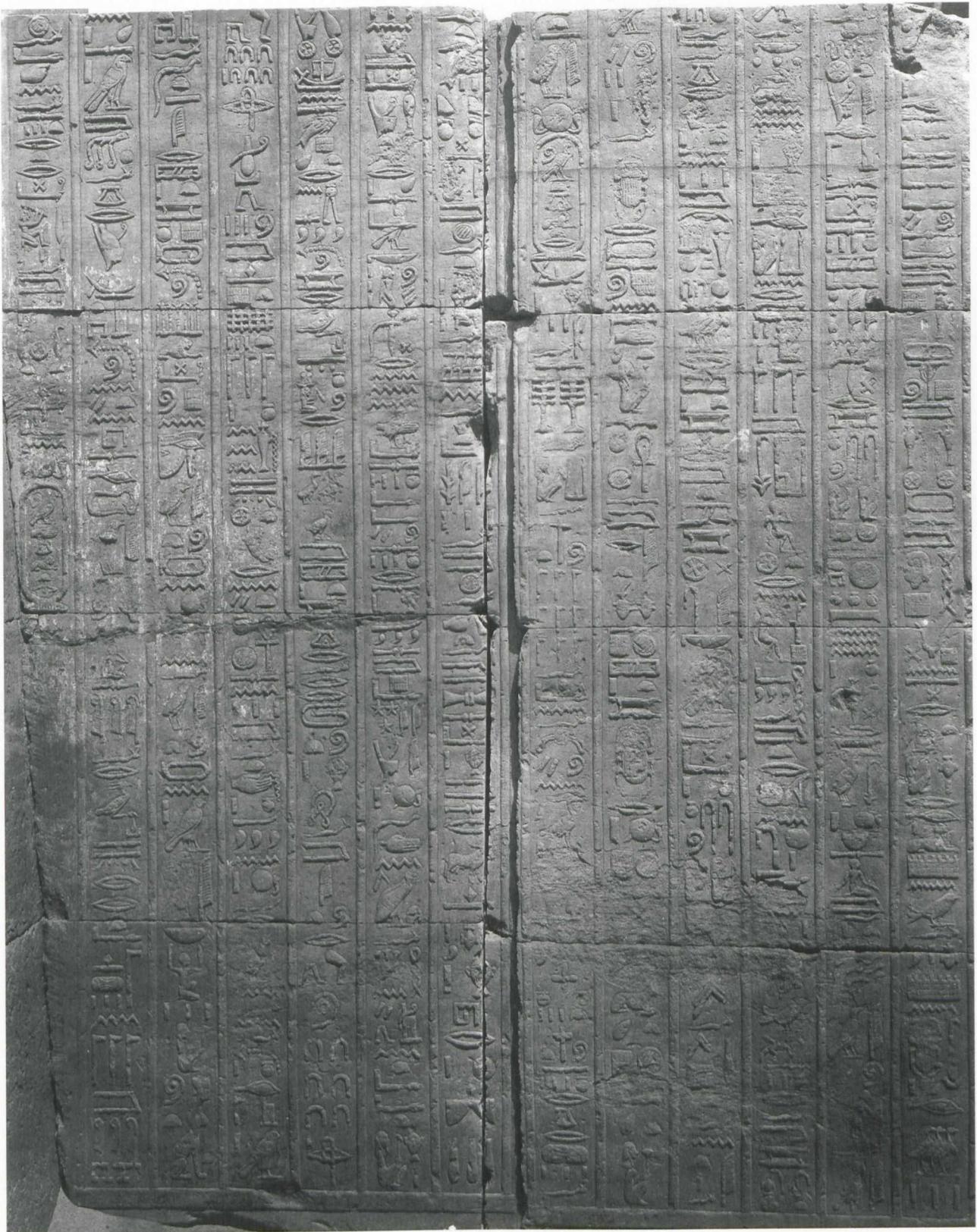


Fig. 4: The text of the Book of the Faiyum in the Temple of Kom Ombo from the time of Emperor Tiberius.

texts. In view of the complexity of the task before them, we might imagine that, from the planning for the building of a new temple in the Faiyum until the completion of composing a comprehensive book such as the *Book of the Faiyum* might take two hundred years. Therefore, two rough phases can be suggested for the origin of the *Book of the Faiyum*:

- 1) The creation of the *Book of the Faiyum* until the completion of the text in the Ptolemaic Period (304-30 BC).
- 2) The dissemination of the text in Roman times (30 BC-395 AD).

When the creation of the *Book of the Faiyum* is seen as connected with the actions of the Ptolemies regarding hydraulic engineering in the Faiyum it becomes clear why the bodies of water have such a prominent place in the ancient text.

Three places play a special role in the *Book of the Faiyum*: Krocodilopolis (Shedet), the “House of Life of Ra-sehet” and a place called “Acacia of Neith.” It is logical to assume that the places that engaged personnel and finances in the preparing of the *Book of the Faiyum* are identical to the three locations named. Since historical scholarship involving traditions, as we have seen, was the role of the “House of Life”, it can be assumed with reasonable certainty that the text, as it has come down to us today, was composed in the “House of Life of Ra-sehet”. This would explain why so many internal details of this “House of Life” are revealed in the *Book of the Faiyum*, when otherwise this institution was shrouded in so much silence and secrecy.

The innovative design of the *Book of the Faiyum*

The author of the *Book of the Faiyum* made use of a pictorial form of representation or diagram, which was innovative for its time. Instead of listing the sacred items and the local myths one after another from right to left, as in the comparable “local mono-

graph” Papyrus Jumilhac, our author uses a representation of the Faiyum similar to a map in the main section of the *Book of the Faiyum* and inserts the local myths into this framework. In this instance, it reads from left to right. It is not as if maps were unknown in Egypt; entirely original was their use of an actual region in connection with the local mythology. Possibly maps used in the Roman Empire played a decisive influence.

The map layout has been skillfully adapted to the geography of the Faiyum by the author of the papyrus; in fact, the entire cosmos in harmony reveals itself on closer inspection by the reading direction and the direction of motion. Normally, Egyptian papyri were written from right to left, especially in later times. This is true for all texts written in cursive scripts. The same holds true, albeit with certain exceptions, for all texts written in hieroglyphs. One exception, for example, being the texts concerning the course of the sun through the Underworld, such as the Amduat (“What is in the Underworld”) papyri. Here, the direction of writing and reading is left to right. This is not only the direction of writing and reading, it is also thematically the direction of movement. The sun moves through the Underworld from left to right. In ancient Egyptian perception, “left” denotes “East,” and “right” denotes “West.” In representations of the Underworld, however, this direction of movement is reversed: the sun keeps moving westwards and finally, miraculously, arises again in the East.

In the *Book of the Faiyum*, we also find the left-to-right orientation of texts. Here, however, the texts do not pertain to the Underworld but to the terrestrial world, as we are accustomed to seeing on our maps. The only difference being for the Egyptians, the main cardinal point was the South. So when they looked “up the Nile” (upstream) in the direction of Africa, the East was to the left and the West was to the right. Thus the orientation of the papyrus reading from left to right corresponds exactly to the movement of the sun from East to West, as well as the movement of the water in the Bahr Yusef from the Nile valley in the East to the Lake of the Faiyum in the West. According to Egyptian belief, the Nile always flowed

from South to North, even if in some areas it takes a course in a different direction. A waterway that moves out from the Nile to the Faiyum flows, by Egyptian definition, not northwestward but westward. In the papyrus of the *Book of the Faiyum* B/H/A, according to the inscriptions, the upper edge is the South, the lower border the North, and the West to the right. The author of the present version of the *Book of the Faiyum* is undoubtedly to be credited with the innovation of coordinating the reading direction of the papyrus with the movements of the sun and the water. The author also indicates the opposite movement of the sun in the river from West to East, as shall be explained below. Hence, the myths of the *Book of the Faiyum* become easier to understand through the orientation of the courses of the sun and water in the Faiyum.

The use of the illustrated version of the *Book of the Faiyum*

Looking at the illustrated version of the *Book of the Faiyum* B/H/A as a whole, the question of the purpose and use of the papyrus comes up. Such papyri can hardly be “reading papyri,” or papyri intended to be read by the owner. The individual sections of text are so long that they cannot even be completely unrolled by one reader with outstretched arms. Another difficulty is that several times while reading the papyrus it is necessary to turn the roll 90° or 180° to see the hieroglyphs from the proper side. This holds true viewing the illustrations as well. The representation of the lake in Section Three of the papyrus is about 5’9” long! Finally, an understanding of the script must be considered as a factor when evaluating the possible use of the papyrus. The hieroglyphic script with its late developments was only mastered by a small number of scholars during Ptolemaic and Roman rule in Egypt. This was the writing of the “House of Life.” In the *Book of the Faiyum*, cryptographic (from Greek, *kryptos* = “hidden, secret” + *graphē* = “writing”) elements are also used, which give the impression they were only

understood by the same small circle of scribes who wrote them.

Since the illustrated papyri of the *Book of the Faiyum* were probably not made for the practical purpose of reading them, they may be “display papyri” – manuscripts that brought prestige to the owner. This situation is comparable today to the possession of facsimile editions of rare and beautiful texts or even antique originals. The possession of facsimiles or originals, for example a valuable medieval manuscript, indicates the owner is a connoisseur of beautiful and scholarly texts. Whether the owner was actually capable of reading the manuscript is another matter. It can therefore be suggested the illustrated papyri of the *Book of the Faiyum* may possibly have come into the hands of Greek inhabitants of the Faiyum.

Another plausible use of the manuscripts should not be underestimated – the “academic use.” This concept recognizes the exchange of knowledge from one “House of Life” to another, specifically regarding the presentation of rare knowledge. Through such exchanges it was possible to acquire texts from other parts of Egypt, thus raising the value of one’s own library. It was immaterial whether a manuscript was a “papyrus for reading” or a “display papyrus” as discussed above.

The fact that there are a relatively large number of extant Hieratic copies of the *Book of the Faiyum* which transmit the text without illustrations in a manageable format indicates that there was an active need for such “books.” The Hieratic-Demotic papyri are to be regarded the same way. These were intended for learned owners from the Egyptian populace. One example is a Hieratic copy of the text written by a priestly scribe for the First Priest of Sobek-Ra.³ It can be assumed that a First Priest in the Faiyum would have been acquainted with the text of the *Book of the Faiyum*. Thus, the question is more about ownership of the Hieratic text, not knowledge of the contents. Whether the text was acquired for a private or official library is naturally impossible for us today to say.

The subdivisions of the *Book of the Faiyum*

Due to the structure of its contents, but also on the basis of external factors, the *Book of the Faiyum* can be divided into eight sections. Additionally, there was some form of introduction, however, only a few fragments in Hieratic script remain. These show that illustrations were present in the Introduction.

- Section 1: The Inflow to the Faiyum
- Section 2: The Inflow to the Faiyum (the Great Celestial Goddess) and the Eastern region of the Lake
- Section 3: The Lake of the Faiyum
- Section 4: Krocodilopolis (Shedet), the central city of the Faiyum
- Section 5: The “House of Life of Ra-sehet”
- Section 6: The place “Acacia of Neith”
- Section 7: The Foundation of the Faiyum by the Primeval Gods
- Section 8: Final Illustration, making in pictures a concluding statement about the significance of the Lake of the Faiyum

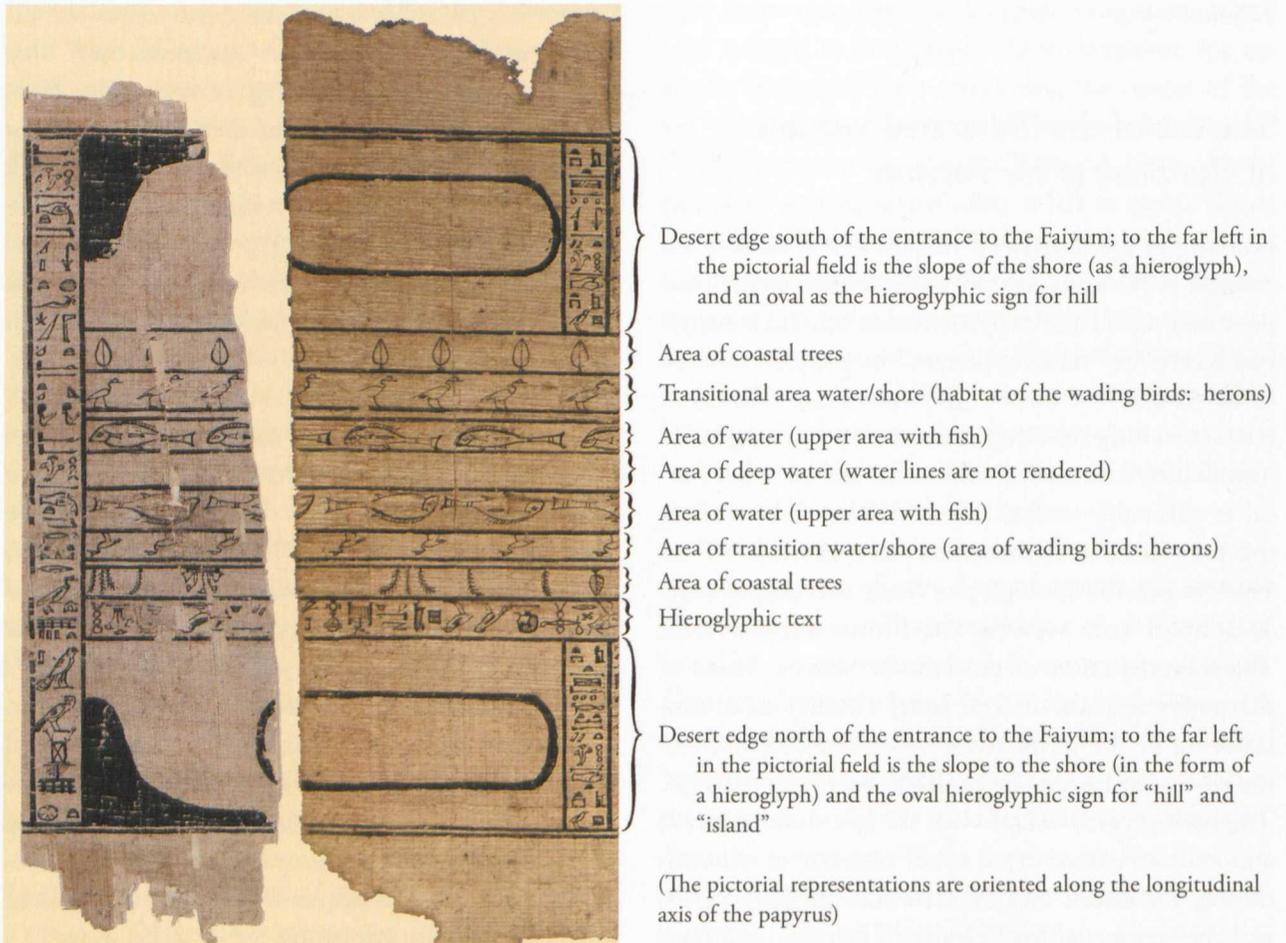


Fig. 5: The entrance area to the Faiyum, facing left (East) to the Nile valley, is marked by hieroglyphic signs symbolizing a “steep embankment” from above and below it. The two ovals on the right represent the two tongues of the Libyan Desert that border the Faiyum down to the Nile valley.

First Section

The first section of the papyrus is concerned with the approach to the Faiyum basin from the Nile valley approximately at the town of Krocodilopolis. The myths that took root here are centered thematically on the relationship of the Nile valley to the Faiyum.

The entrance to the Faiyum is shown as a physical entrance at the far left on the papyrus by two black signs above and below (fig. 5). Also in other texts, as in the beginning of the *Book of Gates*, these signs represent the entrance (fig. 6). In the *Book of Gates*, a text that describes the course of the sun through the twelve hours of the Underworld, the threshold to the Underworld is similarly indicated. They are also found in representations in which door leaves are shown.

To the right of these signs on the upper and lower borders of the papyrus, there follow two oval signs. The upper oval is “the Southern Sand of the Wetlands”, the lower one “the Northern Sand of the Wetlands”. The wetlands are the central area between these two regions. It is distinguished by two bands in which fish swim. In the middle is one blank strip, which is actually twice as wide and was supposed to be filled out with water lines. Above and beneath the fish friezes are registers with water fowl and outside of them, friezes with plants. These registers represent the shores of the wetlands. Farther outside, and thus already in the zone of the desert edge are representations of gods, bordered by lines with hieroglyphs. Thus the section is set up so that the deepest part – the deep-water – is shown in the middle, above this is the area where the fish swim, then the area of shallow water, where wading birds such as herons search for their prey, then the shores with plants that typically need a lot of water, such as willow, reed and tamarisk. South (above) and North (below) of this is shown the desert edge, the area that lies out of reach of the floodwaters.

The upper (Southern) oval is described as the place where the enemies of the sun god from the city of Heracleopolis (in the Nile valley) invaded when they rose up against him. But the sun god had retreated to

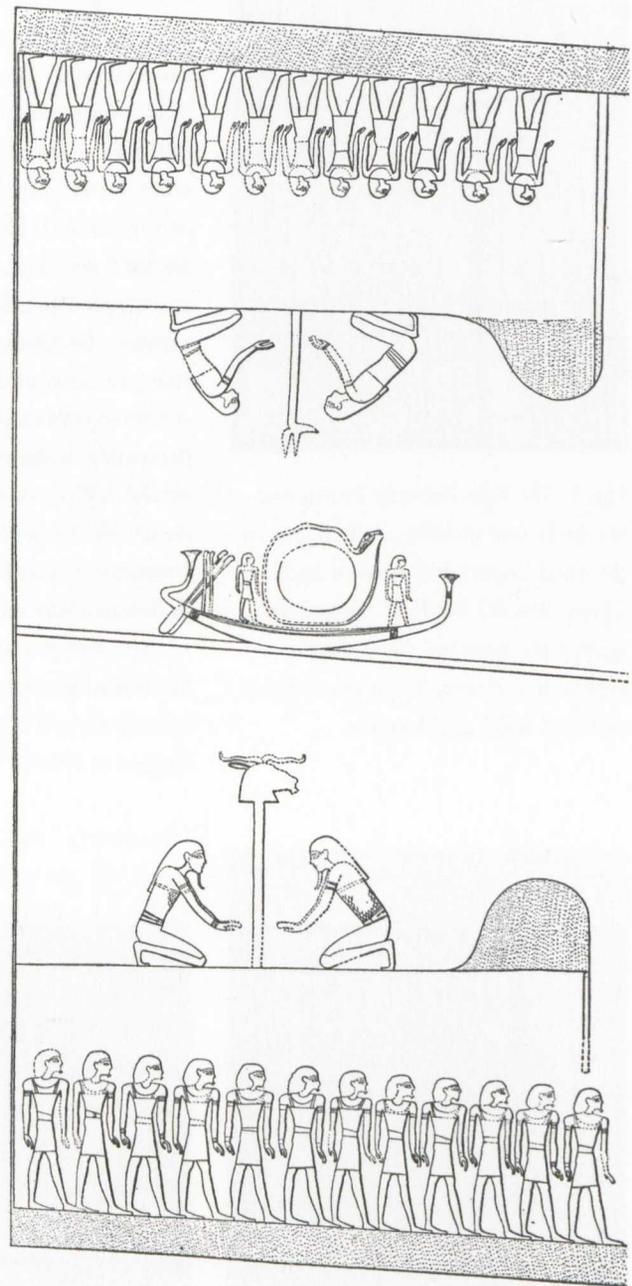


Fig. 6: The entrance to the Underworld (*Book of Gates*, Tomb of Ramses VI). As the Underworld is represented here as a waterway, on which the sun god sails in a bark, the transition is marked by two “steep embankments.”

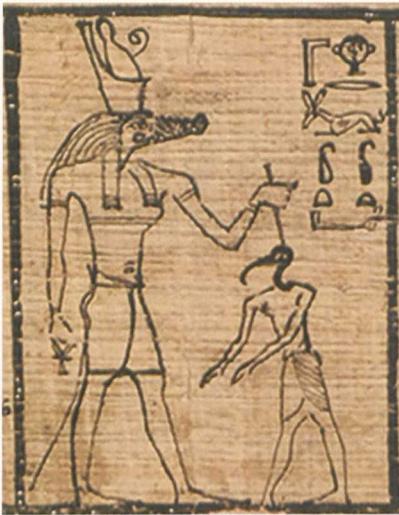


Fig. 7: The fight between Horus and his uncle and arch-foe, Seth, is one of the most important myths of ancient Egypt. It is the battle of the positive against the negative. Here, Seth is represented already in the pose of the defeated, small and humble.

his mother, the wetlands. According to the text, these wetlands are the embodiment of the mother of the sun god, the body of the Celestial Cow. She protects the sun god from his enemies. Here we meet for the first time the concept of the Celestial Cow. This is a very ancient concept, and we will encounter it again frequently. She can assume the form of a cow or a human, she can embody the wetlands at the water's edge, but she can also personify larger bodies of water. In the region of the Faiyum, she is above all the water with its densely overgrown shores, which are impenetrable for enemies.

The lower oval is the Northern Sand and is called "Menmen." It is described as a region that once belonged to Osiris before Seth turned

against him in Heracleopolis (in the Nile valley). The place "Menmen", together with the opposite-lying Southern Sand forms a protection against the place of Seth, Oxyrhynchus in Upper Egypt, where the god was worshipped. The mention of Seth makes it clear that this is not a matter of protecting the sun god but of protecting Osiris. One of the embodiments of Osiris in Egypt is as the fertility-bringing floodwater. Its path into the Faiyum basin is to be understood as parallel to the outbreak of the sun from its accustomed path over the Nile valley. Both gods, the sun god Ra and the fertile inundation Osiris, are the most important elements for life in the Faiyum. They are shielded from the Nile valley through two sand hills,



Fig. 8: Tatenen is a primeval and creator god. Here in the *Book of the Faiyum*, he is brought in connection with a "Lake of Memphis" and the Faharka (Nile blowfish).



Fig. 9: The Faharka (Nile blowfish, in a painting from the Tomb of Nebamun) is washed up to Egypt from the Sudan with the floodwaters of the Nile and is therefore regarded as a sign of the Nile flood. Some of the fish's organs are poisonous, others are edible.

which on the exterior look like two pylons (Greek for “towers,” but in Egypt actually more like high buttress walls).

The next place is called “the Battlefield,” of which is said, “*it lies to the west next to the place Menmen. It is the place where Horus fights Seth because of matters of his father, Osiris.*” The illustration shows this fight: Horus with a crocodile head and the double crown of Egypt in combat against a small and submissive Seth standing before him, who here apparently has a flamingo head (fig. 7). Red, the color of the flamingo’s plumage, is the color of Seth and can denote evil. The fight is, naturally, already decided; it always ends in favor of Horus, the son of Osiris. The text continues: “*The sun god Ra drove out his enemies here on the 23rd day of the first month of the season of inundation.*” The fight between Horus and Seth is undoubtedly waged between the precedence of vegetation over the infertile desert. The “battleground” should therefore be located at the place of the watershed between the Nile valley and the Faiyum near Hawarat el-Maqa. When the floodwaters, the “*matters of Osiris,*” come over this threshold, they empty into the Faiyum, and the infertile desert is defeated. Since Horus is also an embodiment of the sun, the victory of Horus is simultaneously a victory of the sun god, Ra, over his enemies. Thus, the date at the beginning of the season of inundation (summer) was certainly

not chosen arbitrarily. Probably it was the day when the floodwaters reached the watershed at Hawarat el-Maqa.

The next place to the right, or West, is called “Lake of Memphis” (fig. 8). This may have been a lake in which fish were caught that were washed into the Faiyum with the floodwaters. In the text, the blowfish or Faharka (*Tetraodon lineatus*) is named “*the one who comes from the South, from Elephantine*” (fig. 9). As the Faiyum lake is strongly salty and the blowfish cannot survive in it (without difficulty), if they ever reached that far at all, it was because fish were directed into a water catchment basin, where they could be held a longer time for eating. Unfortunately, there is no evidence for such facilities.

The next locality apparently also has something to do with catching fish. The place is called “Land of the Pyramid,” which can only refer to the pyramid of Hawara. Alongside its patron deity, Herishef (“the one who is over his lake”), a bird, named “Lord of the Catch,” is illustrated here (fig. 10). The name presumably refers to the fishing, which this bird is hoping to do. The text explains that the bird sits in the branches of the Ished tree.

The next place shows “Isis of Atfih”, a goddess who often takes on a full bovine form, or at least a cow’s head (fig. 11). In this goddess is concealed a myth that illustrates impressively how such myths were founded. The town



Fig. 10: The “Lord of the Catch”.



Fig. 11: Unlike most other representations of Isis, Isis of Atfih has a cow’s head or a complete bovine form. The town Atfih is situated not far from the entrance to the Faiyum. Its mythology exerted a strong influence on the Faiyum.



Fig. 12: Satis and Anukis are typical goddesses of the cataract region south of Aswan. They distribute the water to northern and southern Egypt. Apparently it is their job to distribute the water in the Faiyum, where in the vicinity of Krocodilopolis, the stream of water flow of the Bahr Yusef must be distributed over the whole region of the Faiyum.



Fig. 13: The sun god Ra is designated here as belonging to “Mer-wer,” a place in the vicinity of Krocodilopolis, which can presumably be understood as the end point of the Bahr Yusef. “Mer-wer” is also the Egyptian name for the Bahr Yusef. The Greeks made “Mer-wer” to “Moeris” and believed it to be the name of the king who founded the Faiyum.

Atfih, situated not far from the entrance to the Faiyum in the Nile valley, was called in Egyptian “Tep-ihet,” which meant “Head of the Cow.” The town was the capital of the 22nd Upper Egyptian nome, or province, which had as its emblem a knife. The myth related how Isis, who normally had a human head, received a cow’s head. In a fight between Horus and Seth, Horus’s mother took the opposing side. Thereupon, the furious Horus cut his mother Isis’s head off. The god Thoth came on the scene and replaced the head with a cow’s head. One can easily see what influence the place-name “Head of the Cow” and the “Knife” emblem of the nome had on this myth.

The two goddesses in the second of the following illustrations (fig. 12) are the deities who orchestrate that the water comes out of its source at Elephantine and flows northwards to Upper and Lower Egypt. These particular goddesses are illustrated here probably because it is here, shortly before Krocodilopolis, that the

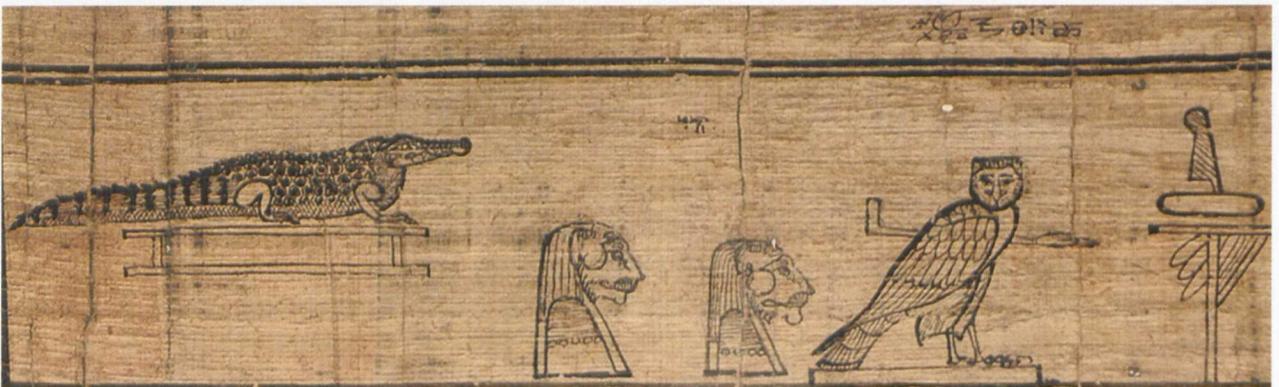


Fig. 14: Hieroglyphic-cretic text: “The Faiyum is in the power of Sobek.”

Bahr Yusef branches off to the North and the South.

The name of the next locality is “Mer-wer” – “Great Canal” (fig. 13). It is the same name the Bahr Yusef has in Egyptian and the Greeks rendered as Moeris. From this name arose the legend that there once existed a King Moeris, who ordered the digging of the lake in the Faiyum. The place “Mer-wer – Great Canal” is probably the end point of the like-named waterway in the vicinity of Krocodilopolis. We should not, however, imagine this waterway to be all that large. It was nothing like a canal in our sense today. Still, this watercourse brought water and fish into the Faiyum, as the illustration in the middle of the papyrus shows.

One representation from the upper (Southern) border of this papyrus section should still be mentioned, although it is not actually an illustration but a monumental, somewhat cryptic inscription (fig. 14). It says simply: “*The Faiyum is in the power of Sobek.*” On the upper edge of this band, the same text is written in Hieratic script, showing that, evidently, hieroglyphs (or, at least, cryptic ones) were no longer understandable to all literate Egyptians.

Second Section

The second section of the *Book of the Faiyum* reviews the themes of the first section and already looks forward to the third section, “The Lake of the Faiyum”. The type of representation here differs starkly from the other two, showing how the same landscape can be presented in various interpretations. The two hills to the south and north of the entrance to the Faiyum are seen again here. Now it is not the deterrent character of the hills, the Southern and Northern Sands, that is emphasized, but their unifying character.

On the lower (Northern) side of the papyrus we find the place “Peter (= pētēr).” This word translates as “to watch, observe.” It is also called the “Place of Watching, or Observing.” A crocodile god, presumably Sobek of Krocodilopolis, is looking towards the left, that is, towards the Nile valley in the East (fig. 15). The mention of the place name in the hiero-



Fig. 15: Sobek of Shedet (Krocodilopolis) in connection with the location “Peter, Place of Observation.” Two Canopic jars (images of gods in the form of jars) stand before Sobek’s feet. Possibly the jar on the left is supposed to have a crocodile head. Then Sobek and Horus, the gods mentioned in the text, would be represented here.

glyphic text next to the god only informs us that “*The Faiyum (the Lake Land) is the temple of Sobek of Shedet and of Horus of Shedet.*” At the entrance to the Faiyum, this appears like a doorplate, which made clear to all who entered to whom this region belonged. This place and the hill at the upper border of the papyrus, the South Side, together make up one entity, which gives the impression of the pylons (Greek for “towers”) of an Egyptian temple.



Fig. 16: The drawings of flames that were supposed to be shown in this area were accidentally left out. They can be seen in the same place in a parallel papyrus. The locality “House of the Flame” is apparently to be understood as a place of firelight showing the floodwaters (=Osiris) the way to the Faiyum.

In the execution of the “House of the Flame,” the draftsman made a crass mistake in the drawing of the preliminary lines (fig. 16). He divided the entire field that was reserved for this locality by vertical lines, as if only texts were needed. Through a parallel we know half of the field was supposed to be filled with flames drawn in red. The scribe who added the hieroglyphs noticed the error and left the lower part of the field blank. Perhaps he hoped that the draftsman’s error would be corrected. That never happened, though.

The description of the locality in the Egyptian text says: *“The name of this place is ‘House of the Flame.’ It is the place where the torch is set ablaze in order to show Osiris the way to his lake. This is done by the Entourage of Osiris.”* Thus we have here a hill on which a beacon or lighthouse is lit when Osiris comes. The “coming of Osiris” can only signify here the approach of the Nile flood. Which criteria was decisive for this, we cannot say. The watch for the phenomenon took place without doubt from the northern hill “Peter,” the “Observation Point.” Once the approach of the flood was ascertained, a message was sent to the “House of the Flame.” Here the “Entourage of Osiris” – in a parallel text the “Entourage of Isis” – lit a fire as a beacon. Thereupon, Osiris (= floodwaters) redirected his flow into the Faiyum.

Between the two localities indicated on the papyrus runs a narrow strip from left (East) to right (West). The mistake that we encountered in Section One of the papyrus continues here, since this strip was originally supposed to be twice as wide. It represents the watercourse of the Bahr Yusef, noted in the first section of the papyrus, to the wetlands. These wetlands are personified by the Great Goddess.

The goddess is represented standing, although her image is turned 90° in counterclockwise direction (fig. 17). She has raised both arms, thus simultaneously representing the goddess of the sky, Nut, – supporting herself by her hands and feet on the horizon – arching her body over the sky. The name of the goddess is given in the adjacent text as Mehetweret (Greek: Methyer) meaning “Great Flood.” The writing of the name reveals that the “Great Flood” is actually a cow. The hieroglyphic sign for “cow” appears to the left above the right hand of the goddess. In Egyptian mythology, Mehetweret is the goddess who, in her cow form, gives birth to the sun god Ra. In earthly terms, the primeval body of water that originally enveloped most of the world gave birth to the sun just as a cow does to a calf. Thus the primeval water is a goddess with the character of a cow. Two streams of water branch out from the elbows of this goddess – one towards the North, the other towards the South. These are presumably the two waterways

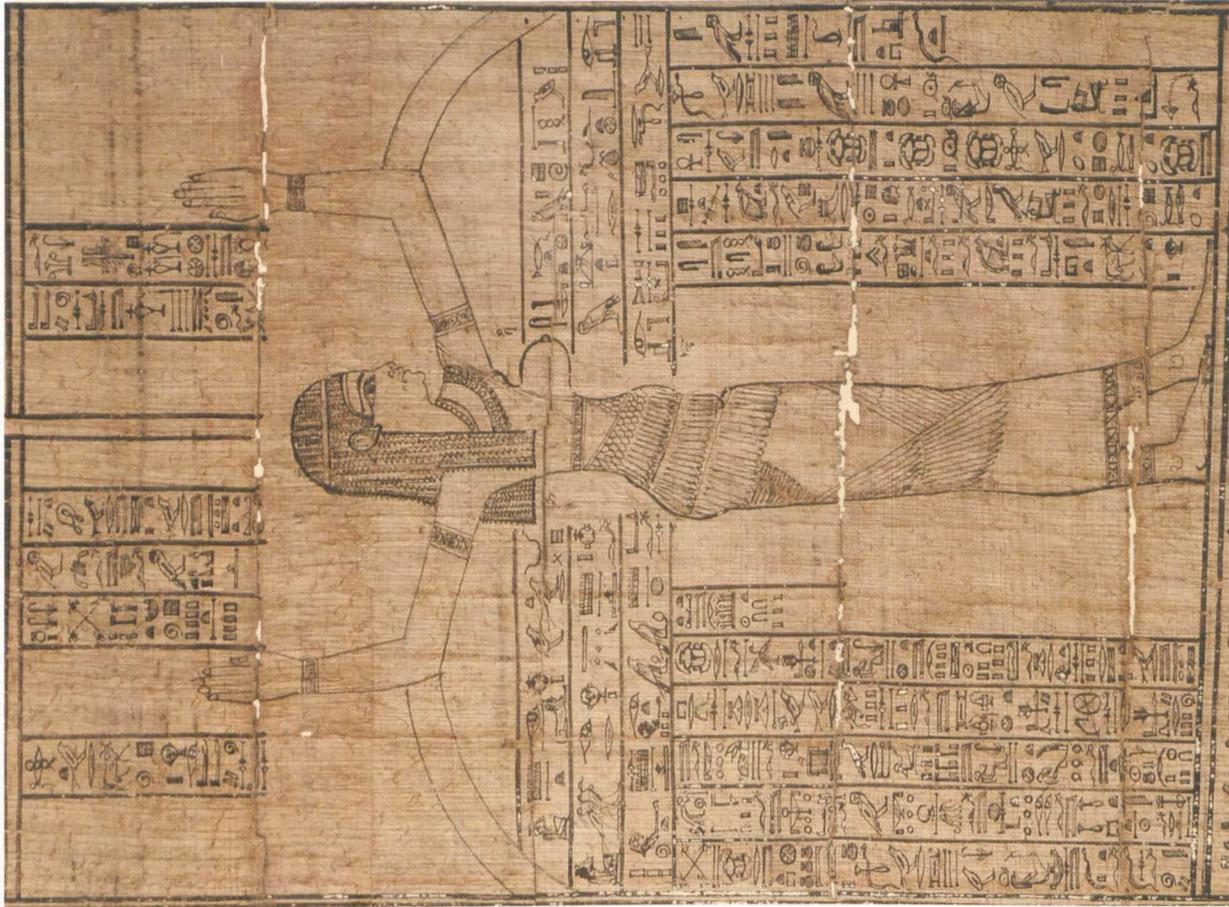


Fig. 17: The goddess Mehet-weret (=the Great Flood) is represented like the goddess Nut who, as a celestial goddess, arches over the sky. Her head points towards the East, in the direction of the Nile valley. Her legs point towards the Eastern shore of the Lake of the Faiyum where, in the following representation, the sun god Ra is shown being born out of the water but also under the legs of Mehet-weret. This dual perception explains why the goddess is represented for the reader as standing, but appears to be reclining.

that branch off from the Bahr Yusef shortly before Krocodilopolis. The text above the head of the goddess reveals that her image was being built into the myth after the Faiyum was founded, like a temple, by the eight primeval gods. This must be imagined as each of the four pairs of gods standing at one of the four corners and holding the measuring cords that determined the dimensions of the temple or, respectively, of the Faiyum. The text tells us: *“These eight primeval deities. They are the gods and goddesses of 4*

and 4 in its length and in its breadth at the performance of the Great Foundation (or Ground-Breaking) in the great lake in the Lake Land.”

To the left (on the papyrus, below) and to the right (above) the body of Mehet-weret is a fairly long text, which is the Faiyum version of the *Book of the Celestial Cow*. The *Book of the Celestial Cow* is a text that is first preserved in writing in the first time in the period of Tutankhamun (1333-1323 BC), but it is probably much older (fig. 18). The story takes us into a time

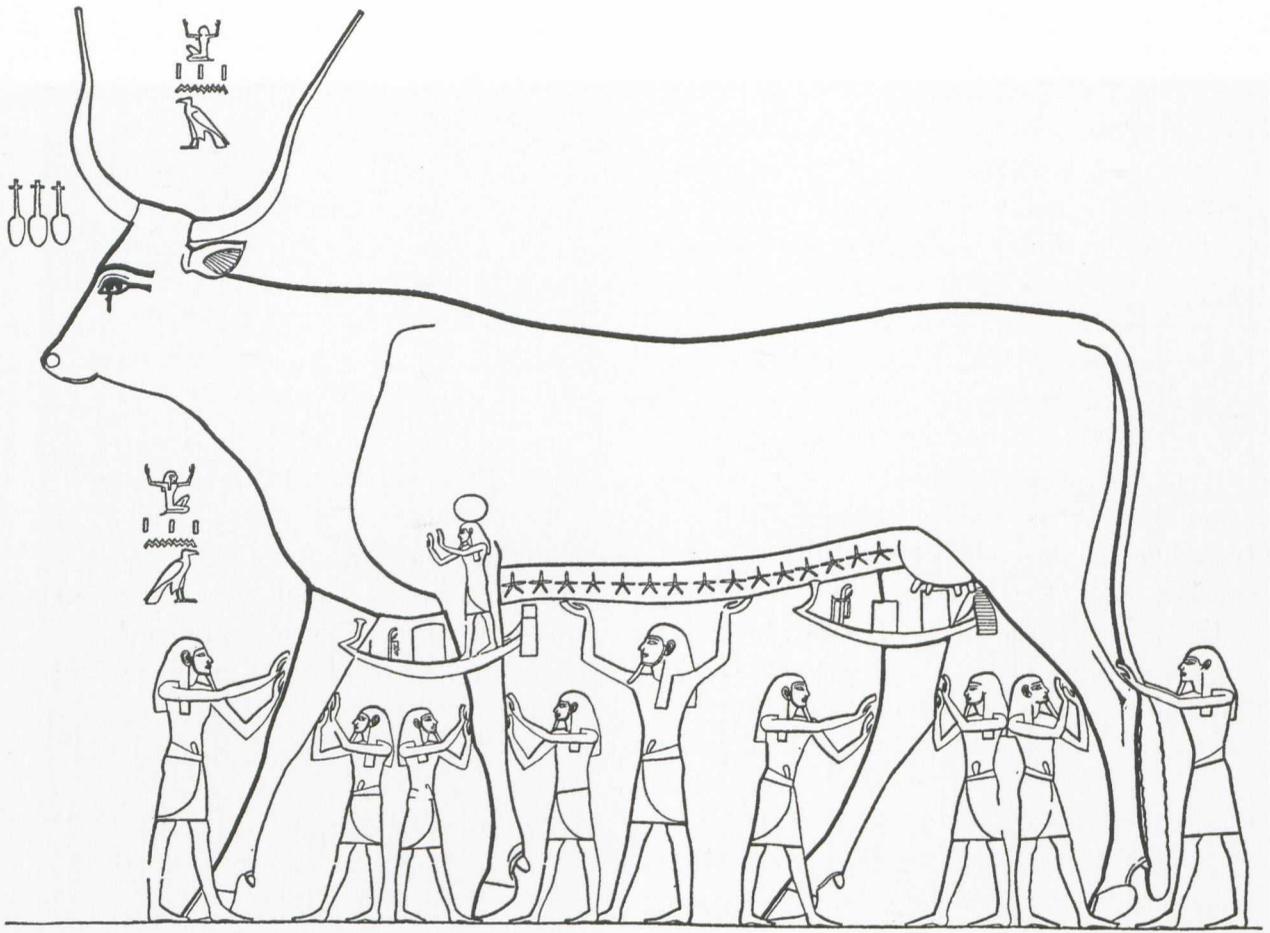


Fig. 18: The Celestial Cow in the Tomb of Tutankhamun. The four pairs of original gods support the cow as she stands up, with the god of air supporting her body. At the top of her forelegs, the sun god Ra is seen in his bark. The second bark of the sun god is seen beneath the cow's udder.

when the sun god Ra still spent his time among men and ruled over them. When the sun god grew old, both men and gods took advantage of his weakness and conspired against him. He saw through their plans and decided to punish them. The story of the punishment, or the repeal of the punishment, occupies a long section of the story. Finally, Ra decides that he no longer wants to remain on Earth. He sets himself on the back of the Celestial Cow who, with the help of the eight primeval deities, raises herself up and carries the sun god to the sky, where he is untouchable in the face of his enemies.

The version of the story that is related within the *Book of the Faiyum* differs in many facets from the

older *Book of the Cow*:

"The Ogdoad (= the eight most ancient gods), originated in the place of the primeval waters of the Wadjwer (the "Great Green," that is, the great body of water including the shoreline plants). It was thus that Ra rested in his own body. He was old. His bones were of silver, his flesh was of gold, his hair was of lapis lazuli, both his eyes were of green (Wadj-) stone, and his sun disk was of turquoise. Then he recognized the (evil) plan of the people and gods in Heracleopolis. While his body rejuvenated itself in a time span of 12 days (another version: 12 months), they came out with fury. Great was their number against him at the Island of Flames. They rose up and fought against those who rose up against them. And

so came to be the name of this place, Pa-aha, which lies in Heracleopolis, in the fourth month of the dry period, day 15. He went out before them to the great lake in the Lake Land in the first month of the inundation season, day 23. It is the place of concealment of the Ogdoad. It harbors the hiding place of his fathers and mothers. The Ihet cow took him on her back. She is his mother since the beginning of time. She protects him from his enemies. So came to be her name, Shedet. She gave him life with her milk. So came to be the Lake, Ra came into being, Mehet-weret came into being, Shedet (the goddess) came into being, becoming the "Great Green" lake. (or ...of the sea?) Ra lives from (his) enemies. He spits down beneath her, at this place everlasting."

The sun god has grown old here, too. In the evening the sun must descend into the Underworld to rejuvenate there and be born anew in the morning. This condition of weakness is exploited by humanity and the gods in Heracleopolis. Heracleopolis is the city in the vicinity of the entrance to the Faiyum and is essentially a synonym for the revolt against the sun god. After the sun god rejuvenates himself and was reborn on the Eastern horizon, his opponents attack him. This happens at the "Island of the Flame." This "Island of the Flame" is a mystical place on the Eastern horizon, where the newborn god massacres his enemies daily, so the sky at the Eastern horizon turns red. The red color could have resulted from the blood shed by the enemies or, alternatively, from the flames that destroyed them. The battle is said to have occurred at Pa-aha, which can mean "Place of the Uprising" or "Battleground."⁴ After this battle, Ra decides to draw back from the men and gods in the Nile valley. He retreats to the Faiyum and reaches it on the 23rd day of the first month of the season of inundation. This is the day when, as noted, the floodwaters of the Nile reach the watershed of Hawarat el-Maqa.

The Faiyum is seen as an ideal retreat for the sun god, since it also harbors the eight most ancient gods, "his fathers and mothers." Here in the Faiyum, he finds his mother. She takes him up on her back and – this is not expressly stated – stands up and, in doing so, carries the sun to the sky. She protects the sun god (the

verb "shed" = "to protect"), and from which comes from her name Shedet ("protectress," and also the Egyptian name of Krocodilopolis). She gives him life through her milk. No doubt the idea behind this association was the word shedi, "to nurse, suckle." Now the text relates everything that has come into existence as a result of this mythical development, and that the sun god is untouchable before his enemies in face of his enemies. A much humanized detail of the myth shows him spitting down on his foes from above.

The question remains why, in this illustration, the standing goddess is rotated 90 degrees so that she appears to be reclining. The answer to the question lies in the second part of this section of the papyrus, where the lake of the Faiyum is illustrated.

The illustration is devoted to two divine barks, which are shown with their prows facing East (left) (fig. 19). Both boats are very similar but differ in some important details. The two main figures in the barks are the seated gods, both with crocodile heads. The boats have only one rudder.

On the lower bark, which bears the name "Strong with Power," a text is seen next to the god which says: "It is Sobek who travels on the northern lake." This god wears the double crown of Egypt. Before him and turned to face him stands the Northern Egyptian Meret. Meret is a goddess who entertains the gods through her rhythmic clapping. Thus here she has raised both her arms to clap. Behind the goddess is a ram's head. Prow and stern of the boat are decorated with falcon heads crowned with sun disks.

The upper bark has, next to the crocodile-headed god, the text: "It is Ra who travels on the Southern Lake." The division of the papyrus according to the cardinal directions is seen again here. Thus the Meret before Ra is the Southern Egyptian Meret. Prow and stern of the bark are decorated here with ram's heads, each crowned with a sun disk. The ram's heads are the same as the one that are seen in the lower bark. Both at the front and the back of the boat is a lion with a tree. Under the prow, a lotus blossom pokes up out of the water. The water under the boat is indicated by vertical zigzag lines. The rendering of water under the lower bark was forgotten.

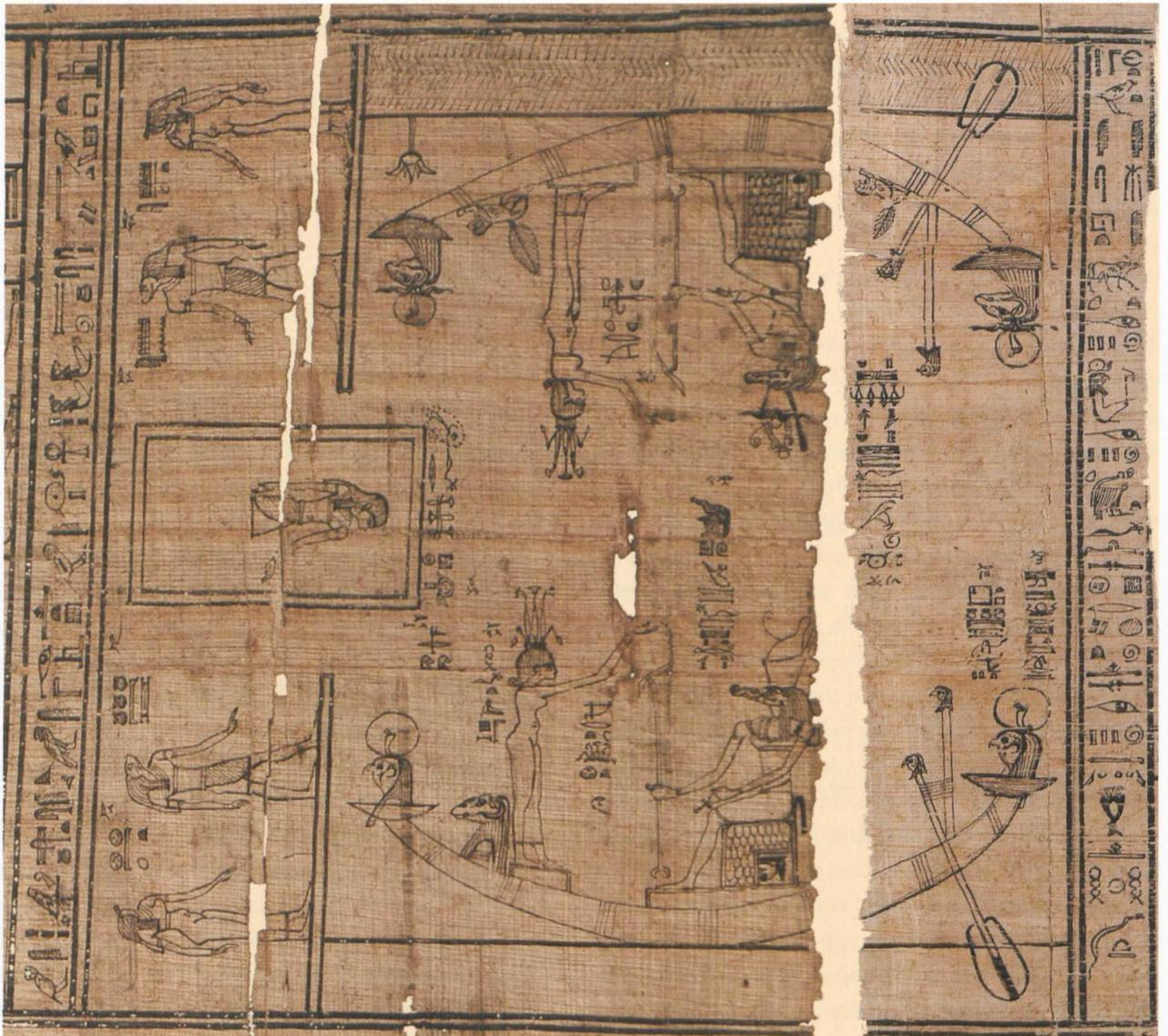


Fig. 19: Representation of the East of the Faiyum Lake. The sun god is born anew in the morning from the primeval water (the Great Flood = Mehet-weret). Two of the four pairs of primeval deities are present, above Amun and Amaunet, below Nun and Naunet. Morning in the East is symbolized by the two barks which, standing prow to prow, show the sun god debarking from the evening boat and embarking the morning boat.

The two barks are represented prow-to-prow, showing the transfer from the night to the day bark – a representation that is common in Egypt. We have here, then, a situation in the early morning. This stage is illustrated by a man in a box, which is visible at the left side of this picture of the lake. What looks like a

man missing his legs is actually a representation of a man who is emerging from the water. His legs are not yet visible. This type of ephemeral representation is very unusual for gods in ancient Egypt. The accompanying text makes the interpretation of the picture clear: “*Ra is the one who sets out to swim.*” (Notice the

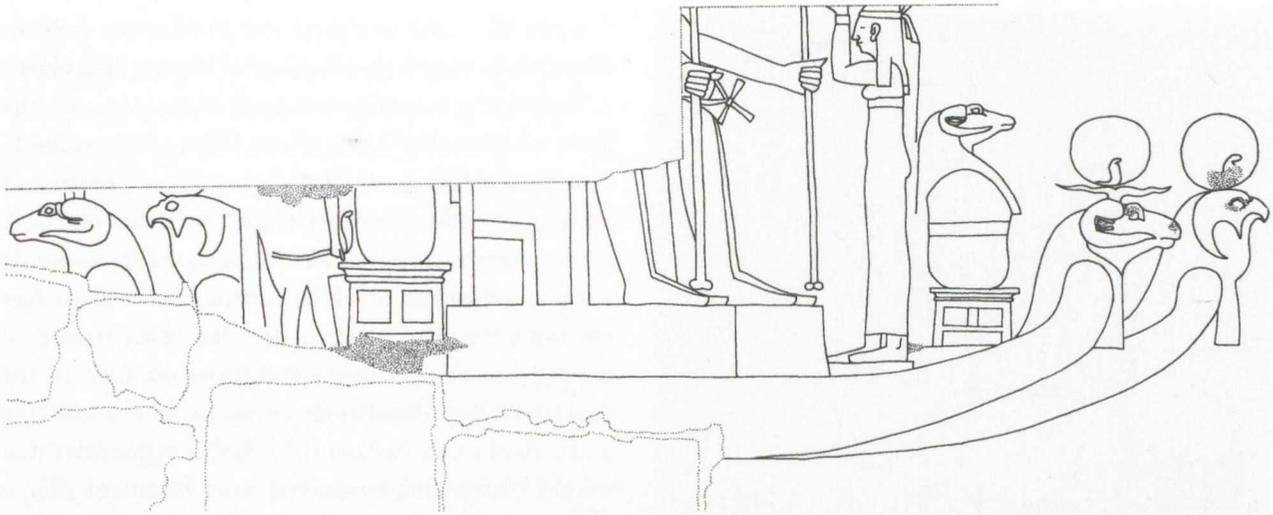


Fig. 20: The two boats that are seen in the preceding illustration are also found on temple walls in Tebtunis in a relief representation of a procession. The center focus of this procession would have been the concept of an annual renewal.

hieroglyph  for “swim” above the illustration). Here in the East of the lake is thus represented the morning birth of the sun god out of the water. Two pairs of primeval deities, each male partner with a frog’s head and the females with snake heads, stand to either side of the birth out of the water.

Combining the image of the Great Goddess, Mehet-weret, with this representation, we can infer that the sun god is born under the feet of the goddess. One could say that the god is born of the Great Flood. The rotation of the figure of the goddess produces the effect of the birth of the sun god occurring underneath his mother. The birth of the sun in the morning repeats the process of creation from the “First Time” of creation all over again.

The representation of the two barks seems to be more than just images on a papyrus. Recently, reliefs in the temple of Tebtunis have become known which shows two barks within a procession (fig. 20). This may indicate a real procession when on a specific date perhaps related to regeneration, the barks are brought to the Eastern shore of the lake.

Third Section

The third section of the *Book of the Faiyum* is a continuation of the second, which was also thematically concerned with the East of the Lake. The task of the scribal artist who created this image was to combine two conflicting directions of movement – the direction that Osiris moved in and the direction towards which the sun moved.

The direction of movement of Osiris in the form of life-bringing floodwaters is seen as linear. He comes as floodwater out of the Nile’s source at Elephantine, flows through the entire Nile valley to the entrance of the Faiyum, is there directed into the Faiyum “by his entourage” and finds his ultimate residence in the “Lake of the Faiyum”, possibly in the outermost Western regions of this lake. This is a journey that only occurs once a year.

The sun, on the other hand, moves in a cyclic direction. It rises mornings in the East and sets evenings in the West. In the night it travels from West to East along a path that is concealed from the human eye,

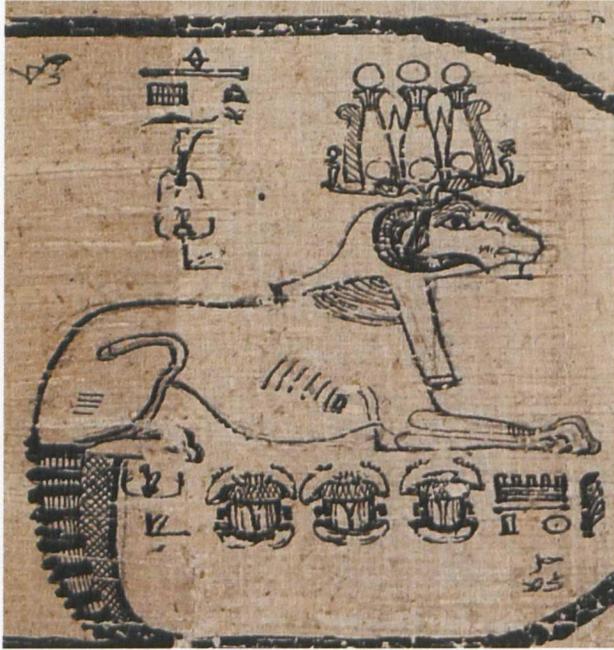


Fig. 21: At the far West of the lake, the sun dips into the water. Unlike other texts, which describe the path of the sun through the Underworld from West to East, in the Faiyum the sun takes on the form of a crocodile and travels this distance under water. Thus the illustration shows, at the far west of the lake, the sun god Amun-Ra in his form as a lion with a ram's head (ram sphinx), and with the addition of a crocodile tail.

and so its character can only be imagined. Unlike the migration of Osiris, the course of the sun repeats daily. But the path of the sun across the sky does not play an important role in the *Book of the Faiyum*. The theme here is limited to the junctures of transition on the Western and Eastern horizons with the nightly path of the sun from the place where it sets in the West towards the spot where it rises in the East. In the Faiyum, this path is set in the water, since the Faiyum is the only place in Egypt where it is possible to observe the sunrise out of the water and sunset into the water. This movement from West to East is pictured as a large crocodile, the embodiment of the local god, Sobek. The Western shore of the lake is the endpoint of the route of Osiris but the starting point of the crocodile's journey. Both aspects are found as illustra-

tions in the third section of the *Book of the Faiyum*; their juxtaposition in one papyrus is quite ingenious.

Like the preceding sections of the papyrus, the section about the "Lake of the Faiyum" is primarily concerned with the cardinal directions. The East is on the left side, the West is on the right. North is below, South is above. The latter two directions do not play a significant role, however, even though they are named on the correct sides. The third section of the papyrus is organized similarly to the first. In the center is a large, oval body of water. In the example of the *Book of the Faiyum* B/H/A, the zigzag lines that should be here were omitted. In a fragment that is now in the Louvre (Paris), however, these lines are clearly visible. This region is the deep-water, the region where the mysteries are enacted. On the papyrus, we find at this spot illustrations that are connected with the mysteries.

Around the outside of this oval runs the "fish frieze," an encircling strip that actually should be filled with fish, as can be seen in other editions of the *Book of the Faiyum*. In our example, the "master artist" drew only one fish and presumably intended for one of his apprentices or assistants to fill the rest of the frieze with the same fish. Why this did not happen, we do not know. The situation was probably similar for the frieze above (and below) this one, which, however, does not fully encircle the pictorial field. Here, too, the "master artist" only put in one wading bird and assumed that the two strips would be filled in with the respective animals. At the Eastern and Western ends, both strips end with drawings of plants. Possibly these plants take the place of the plant strips seen in the first section of the papyrus.

Around this entire area is a square, which has strange forms at its corners. It could reflect the perception that the lake is a temple of Sobek. On the corners would be round posts, which are regularly found at Egyptian temples, represented in full view.

At the top and bottom edges of the papyrus are found, almost without exception, depictions of gods and goddesses. We would expect there to be forty-two gods, corresponding to the number – or the totality – of the patron gods of the Egyptian nomes (Greek

nomoi = “provinces”); it does not matter that it is not possible to identify each individual god with his respective name. On the other hand, it is possible these images represent all the Egyptian gods, in whose midst is located the Lake – or Temple – of Sobek. A third alternative is they could signify the forty-two judges of the dead, since on the right (Western) edge of this section of the papyrus, a trial is being held.

The decisive images in this section are found in the inside oval. Since here, as we have seen, the theme is a West-to-East journey, the description should follow from right to left.

To the far left in the oval, we find a hybrid creature, combining a lion, ram and crocodile (fig. 21). The fusion of the lion with the ram is very familiar in ancient Egypt. Ram sphinxes as this are found in Thebes. Here, in the *Book of the Faiyum*, this figure is supposed to represent Amun-Ra, as the ram’s head might specifically signify the nightly Amun-Ra. That it is Amun-Ra is stated in the text beneath the god. The cryptographic writing with three Kheper-scarabs can be deciphered as “*Khepr, who lets millions of (divine) beings be created.*” His association with the setting of the sun in the Lake is written above the figure of the deity: “*His setting is countless sinkings.*” Upon sinking into the lake, the sun god turns into a crocodile, taking on the form of Sobek. This transformation is shown by the figure of Amun-Ra as a ram sphinx with a crocodile tail attached. This combination is not particularly attractive, but it was necessary. On his head, the god wears the hemhem crown, possibly as a sign of triumph, because he has suppressed his enemies on the western shore.

The next picture shows a crocodile, on top of which a mummy is laid in a rectangular frame, on which stand three shrines, each crowned with a tree hieroglyph (fig. 22). The image here is obviously Ra, since the text next to the illustration says: “*Unknown. It is Ra. It is outflow.*” The text to the left of this picture explains it somewhat better: “*This swimming of Ra and of the Outflow. Hidden is his body in the meadow. There arose a chapel of willow in Shedet (Krocodilopolis). Sobek of Shedet is satisfied with his matters.*” The explanation of the picture is not unambiguous. Apparently

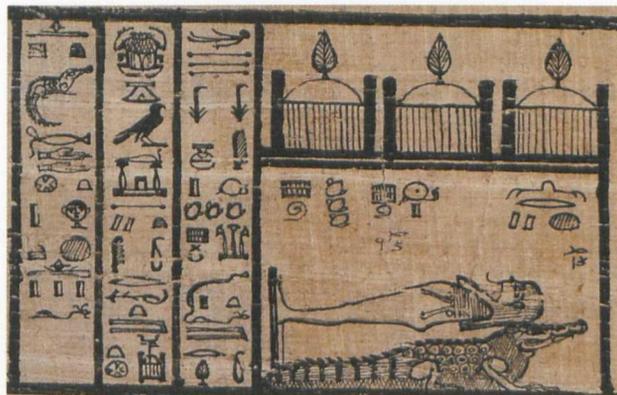


Fig. 22: The sun god Ra in crocodile form. This is his Underworld manifestation, in which he swims back to his rebirth in the East. It is the form in which he will be buried in the West as a crocodile mummy. The mummy in human form over the crocodile is presumably to be understood as the lid of a coffin.



Fig. 23: Cryptic representation of Mehetweret and statement about the appearance of the Lake of the Faiyum.

the body hidden in the meadow, the field chapel, is the crocodile body of Ra, possibly the mummies of the “sacred” crocodiles of Krocodilopolis. The illustration is possibly expressing: mummy + crocodile = crocodile mummy. Perhaps crocodile mummies were kept in Shedet (Krocodilopolis) in chapels of willow. Traditionally – as it is with the mummified corpse of Osiris – alongside the body of the mummy is named the “outflow,” the liquid components of the body. It

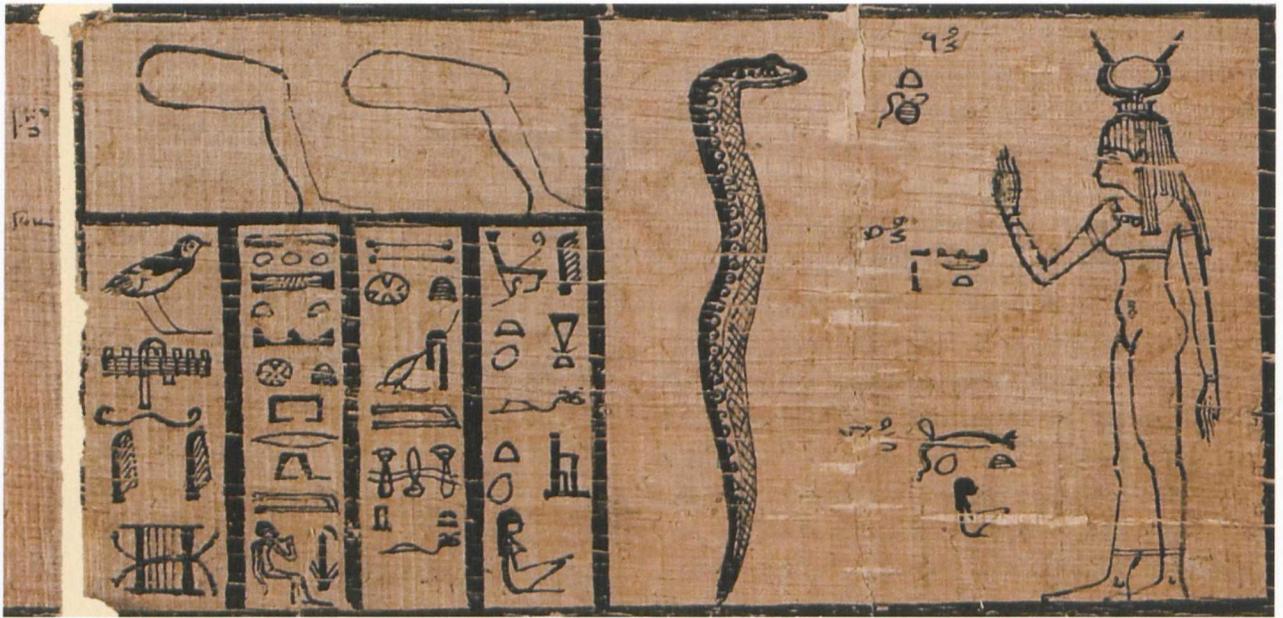


Fig. 24: The images and text are kept cryptic. The two legs symbolize Osiris who, as life-bringing floodwater, is guided by Isis into the Faiyum. On the right, this water – in the form of a snake (Aha-nefer?) – is greeted in the Faiyum.

appears Ra unites here with his Osiride form, which is a crocodile, just as the sun god unites with his Osiride form in the Egyptian *Books of the Underworld*, in order to revive it, and, through this contact, it becomes energized. The representation of the anthropomorphic mummy (= a mummy in human form) can only be understood here concretely as the lid of the coffin of the crocodile. Under this assumption, the long, vertical line under the soles of the feet of the mummy can be explained as the foot board of the coffin.

In the vignette to the left, it is not clear whether the cow's head is an illustration or should be read as a hieroglyphic sign (fig. 23). If it is to be read as a sign, then it should be combined with the word "Great" (weret) over its head, the cow head thus being read "Mehet-weret" – the "Great Flood." This writing would then be a cryptography, or written in secret code. Cryptographically, the text continues: "No divine being knows her." This part is, then, concerned with the great "Lake of the Faiyum", which is simultaneously the Great Flood or the Great Celestial Cow. This god is, according to the text, so secret that no divine being knows it. The text to the left alongside

the figural image repeats the statement: "The environment of the lake is steadfast and fresh with everything that belongs to it. The god rests in his protective environment, the depths of the primeval waters." Which god is meant here – Osiris, Ra or Sobek – is not mentioned. The text continues: "No god or goddess of the First Generation knows its length, its breadth or its depth." Under the image of the cow's head is a special text, a speech of the goddess Shedet, which in this case is another name for Mehet-weret but is also the name for the goddess of Krocodilopolis (=the town, Shedet) "Speech of Shedet: *May the Two Lands, Upper and Lower Egypt, and the Wetlands perpetuate in outflow.*" The statement guarantees moisture in the named territories for all time. Such utterances are to be found frequently in the *Book of the Faiyum*. The declarations of consent of the gods are treated as a legal action, which no one – neither god nor man – can oppose.

The two figures on the left – the goddess with the upright snake and the pair of legs – presumably belong together (fig. 24). In any case, they both refer to Osiris. The text under the two legs reads: "Osiris (written cryptographically), who comes out of Heracleopolis, being shown



Fig. 25: The Celestial Cow, supported by the god of air, Shu. Beneath her forelegs is the solar bark, in which the sun sails across the sky. The sun god Ra, here with a falcon's head, is positioned beneath.

the way by his sister, Isis.” The name of Osiris is written in very tiny Demotic script to the left alongside the text. The representation of Osiris as two legs is incomprehensible to anyone who is not acquainted with the so-called Osiris relics. According to the myth of Osiris, this god is ripped apart and then put together again. This is an image of Egypt which, in the course of its history, repeatedly broke down into its individual provinces (nomoi) and was put together again, i.e. reunited. Within the framework of this myth, one part of his body is associated with each province (nomos) of Egypt. This scheme is not coordinated, and therefore there are, for example, more legs for Osiris than any human being has. The two nomes at the entrance to the Faiyum were associated with “The Legs of Osiris.” Legs were a familiar image because what we call an arm of a river was called a “leg” by the Egyptians, and because the ritual for the reunification of the parts of the body of Osiris was performed with the water from all the Egyptian nomes.

Thus this segment is concerned with Osiris who, as water (or floodwater) from the Nile valley, is led by his sister, Isis, into the Faiyum and arrives finally in the Lake of the Faiyum. This service of guiding the

way was already mentioned in the second section of the papyrus. There it was said that Osiris was shown the way to the entrance of the Faiyum by a beacon. The snake that is greeted by the “Divine Wife Shedet” towards the right of both illustrations is undoubtedly Osiris, and Shedet can be considered here one of the many manifestations of Isis. To explain why Osiris is represented here is more problematical. Probably the snake should be seen as the Aha-nefer serpent, a personification of the sustenance of Egypt. Perhaps this form of the snake had something to do with the long course of the Nile River. The effect of Aha-nefer and Osiris in bringing fertility allows the Egyptian to equate these two figures. This vignette signifies that Osiris – the fertile floodwater – has arrived in the Faiyum. The lake is now his last resting place, although this expression in Egyptian does not have the negative connotation it does for us.

The episode, represented through the image of the Celestial Cow supported by Shu, the god of air, is one of the most important in the process of the regeneration of the sun god (fig. 25). Here, the sun god sits underneath the udder of the Celestial Cow. Since



Fig. 26: The Drinking of the first milk of human-headed or cow-headed goddesses signifies the recognition of the king as the son of these goddesses. Wall painting, Baltimore, Walters Art Museum 22.121. Limestone. New Kingdom, ca. 1300–1200 BC. Ht. – 8¾ inches.

he has a falcon head here, he cannot be represented as the motif demands, actually suckling from the udder of the mother. In the *Book of the Cow* version given in the *Book of the Faiyum*, in Section Two of our papyrus, it says: “She (the mother cow) gave him life through her milk.” In fact, the suckling of the child is the first act upon which a mother – whether human or animal – decides if she recognizes the child and wants to keep it. If she does not nurse it, the child is rejected and abandoned unto death. The analogous action on the father’s part is to pick up the child in his arms, creating bodily contact with it and thereby asserting to the world around him his paternity. Both processes are common in the representation of the king in the temples. Goddesses proffer a breast to the king, gods embrace him. Both representations document that the king is recognized as the child of the gods. Representations of the king drinking at the udder of a cow are also well known (fig. 26).

The text to the vignette is not given in entirety in the *Book of the Faiyum* (B/H/A). Here, it just reads

“*Ihet-cow.*” In a Hieratic parallel, at this same place the legend is more detailed: “*The great Ihet cow, the mother of the Great God in the interior of her lake in the Faiyum.*” The vignette depicts a cow that has just raised itself upright. In other representations of the same event, the eight primeval gods hold the legs of the cow, one divine pair at each leg (see fig. 18). In addition, Shu supports the underbelly of the Celestial Cow, since the cow teeters while trying to stand upright. One gets the impression that an image of a real, newborn calf has become mixed in with the story. The calf teeters and trembles when first trying to stand up, but it must stand up to suckle at the udder. Perhaps in this myth the concept of cow and calf are combined.

We have discussed the falcon-headed sun god who sits up under the cow’s udder on a throne. The bark of the sun rests under the forelegs of the cow. Strangely, boat is supplied with two rudders. It is impossible to say, however, if this detail had a special meaning or if it was a mistake of the artist.

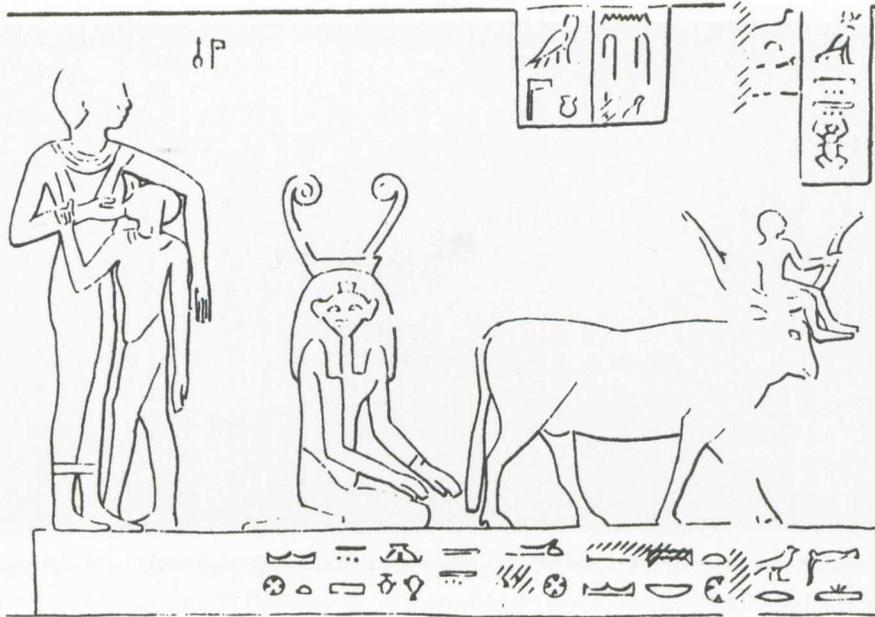


Fig. 27: Representation in the Temple of Hibis in the el-Kharga Oasis showing three individual statues, which symbolize the most important phases during and after birth. The goddess Bat (?) in the middle presumably stands for the successful birth, the goddess on the left for the nursing of the newborn, the cow to the right for the lifting of the newborn.

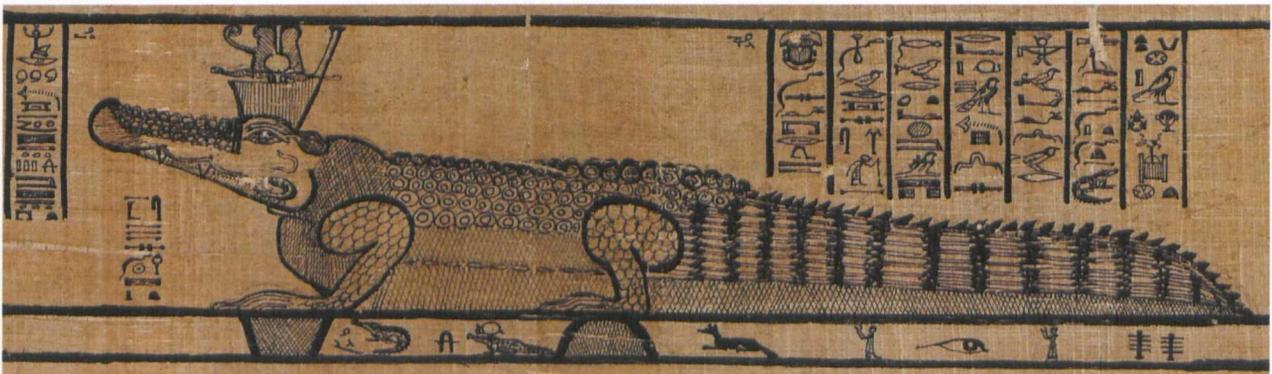


Fig. 28: The large crocodile represents the primeval creator god. It is the god “who created himself, who has emerged from the Wadj-wer, the oldest son of Mehet-weret (the Great Flood) ... Ra-Harakhte is the one ...; Sobek of Shedet, Horus in Shedet.”

In the Temple of Hibis in the Kharga Oasis, a group of figures is represented showing as a theme the regeneration of the sun god in the Faiyum (fig. 27). Alongside the cow, who carries a child on her head, and a Bat goddess, who belongs in the thematic context of the birth, we see a goddess who holds one

breast to a child. This act corresponds to our cow with the sun god beneath her udder.

Certainly the most impressive figure in the center of the Faiyum Lake is the large crocodile, wearing on his head the red crown, from which two feathers rise up (fig. 28). This crocodile is described as a creator

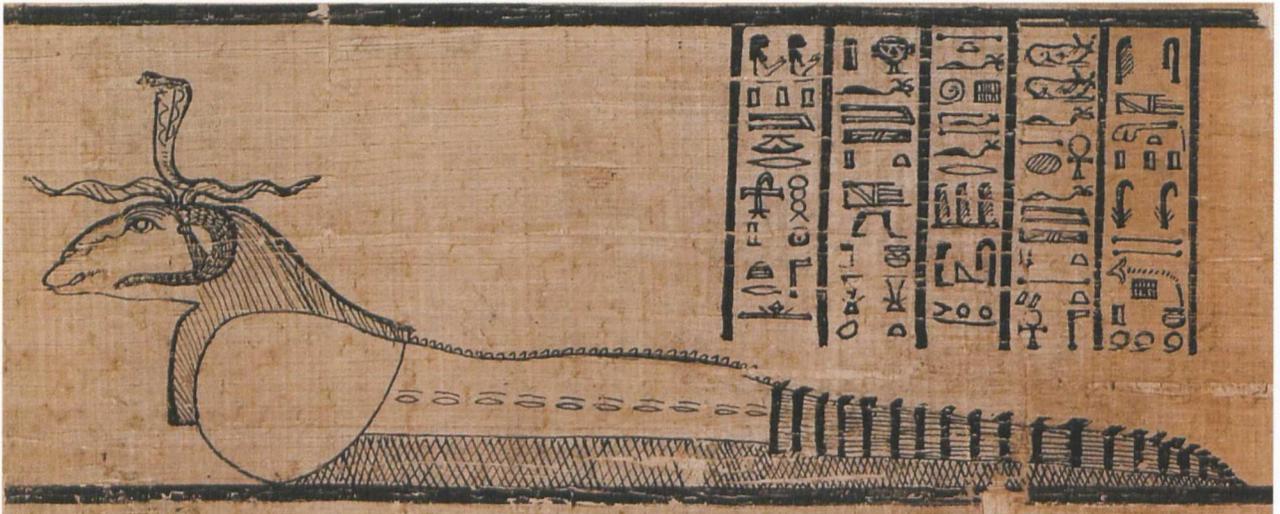


Fig. 29: The great crocodile with its ram's head and phallus-like body appears to symbolize the regenerating capability of the creator god. He can conceive himself.

god. He is the one *“who was created from himself, who emerged from the Wadj-wer (the Great Green – term for a large body of water with green shores), the oldest son of Mehet-weret.”* The crocodile has come out of the water. It was here that the birth of the creator god out of the water occurred, meaning his birth from the Great Flood, which covered everything before the creation. As this *“Coming out”* can also be interpreted as the process of birth, the *“Great Flood”* is being elevated to Mother of the Creator god. In the following text, this *“primeval crocodile”* is equated to other gods: *“Ra-Harakhte (the sun god at the horizon) is the one, he does not set, he does not tire, eternally. (He is) Sobek of Shedet, Horus of Shedet.”*

The crocodile stands on two strange forms that can only be interpreted as cryptographically written signs, since they can be read together as Shedet, which could mean the town of Krocodilopolis. But the signs could also be read as *“Sheta,”* which means *“mystery.”* The latter interpretation is more probable, since under the body of the crocodile, there is another cryptographic inscription, which can be read as: *“The mystery of Sobek is the mystery of Sobek-Ra, steadfastly forever.”*

It is possible for us to gain an approximate understanding of the mystery of the birth of the creator god. He apparently comes from the depths of the primeval waters. For procreation, he dips back into the water and engenders himself again. This is not yet a rebirth, which only occurs when he steps up on land or at least ascends to the upper levels of the water. The actual mystery is thus his act of creating life from himself. The birth as a consequence of conception only occurs later and requires a mother; she is the great body of water. It is not just any water but the primeval flood as an image for the time before the Creation. This bears a striking resemblance to the description of the Creation in Genesis 1: *“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth; the earth was formless and void, darkness lay over the face of the deep, while the spirit of God swept over the face of the water.”*

The power to create, the power to regenerate is apparently represented in the picture of the great crocodile to the left (fig. 29). But here, the crocodile has an extremely unusual appearance. It has no legs, and the ram's head sits on a deliberately outlined shoulder region, giving the body a phallus-like form. The ac-



Fig. 30: The “white hippopotamus” is the counterpart to the “White Cow” in Atfih, as long as this cow stays in the water as the embodiment of the “White Mist,” which, then in the form of a Celestial Cow, carries the sun god to the sky.

comparing text to this illustration underscores the first visual impression. *“This sexual consummation (?) is the body of his two sisters (?). He lives in the lake of the living god. It is he, who comes out to the fields of Sobek, who sees his face in the lake when he goes to the two sisters in the divine night.”* The procreative power with which this text is concerned – even though it is not completely clear – is not the same as the procreative force that produces many offspring. The theme here is, rather, the god’s self-regeneration, allowing him to exist forever. One might recall here the mythology of Kamutef,⁵ but unlike this god, the Faiyum version of regeneration does not require intercourse between the god and his own mother. The mother is here more a station – albeit not a decisive one – in the process of rebirth after a self-procreation.

Perhaps this crocodile is somehow associated with the hippopotamus opposite him (fig. 30). A connection between the two figures emerges clearly from the choice of words in the associated text where we read: *“He (or she) lives in the lake of the living god.”* One might not recognize the figure in the vignette as a hippopotamus but its name, “The Heavy One,” makes this definite. The animal is the *“White One, the*

Heavy One in the Lake. She rests in the interior of the Lake Land (Faiyum). She lives in the lake of the living god, protecting her son. The Lady of Atfih is the one.” In this last statement, the hippopotamus is identified as the White Cow of Atfih. The hippopotamus is the one who lives in the lake when it is not lifting itself into the sky as a cow. In addition, if we consider the appearance of the specifically mentioned color, “white,” in both cases, it becomes clear to us what this concept concerns. If the “White Cow” is to raise her son, the sun god, from the water up to the sky in the form of white mist or fog, she must have been in the water at the outset. That was her form as the “White Hippopotamus.”

The main theme of the representations so far is the regeneration of the sun god, Ra, in the depths of the Faiyum Lake, where he remains “unborn” until, at the end of his passage through the lake, he emerges from the water – that is, he is born and rises to the sky.

The last six images in the large oval of the Lake comprise three divine pairs. That they are male-female pairs is explained in the texts written alongside. The females are the decisive players, but we can only

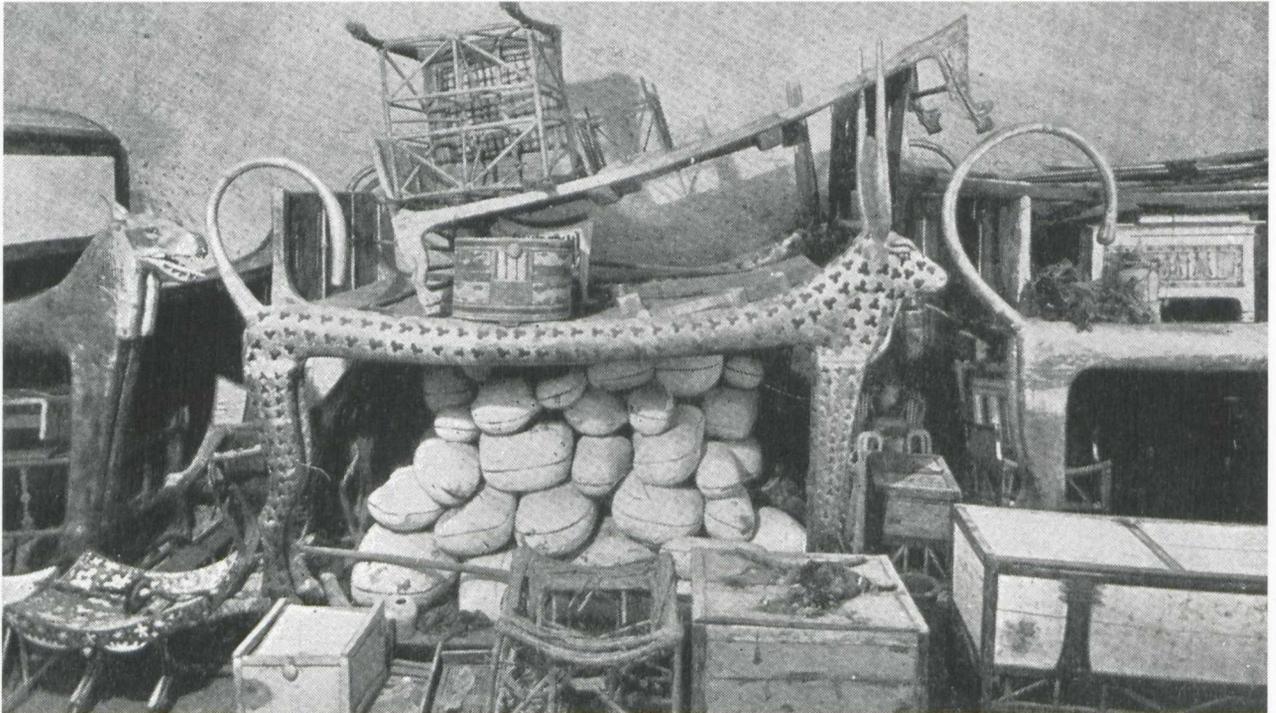


Fig. 31: The three animal biers in the antechamber of the Tomb of Tutankhamun in a photograph by Harry Burton. Left, the bier with a hippopotamus's head, in the middle the bier with a cow's head. Only the back part of the lioness-headed bier is visible at the right in the photograph.

understand their function if we take a big leap back into the time of King Tutankhamun. In his tomb, three large biers with animal heads were discovered – one with the head of a female hippo, one with the head of a lioness and one with a cow's head (fig. 31). These biers or funerary beds are also known from representations on the walls in other royal tombs. They apparently have a significant place in the burial rituals of the kings. On the bier of the hippopotamus goddess, the deceased is received into the body of the divine mother. On the bier of the lioness goddess, he is regenerated, and on the bier of the cow he is born again. This function is apparently also assumed by the three female figures on the left (Eastern) edge of the lake.

The hippopotamus goddess (fig. 32) appears, at first, to have nothing to do with a funerary bed. We must realize, however, that the biers actually stand for goddesses and are only made in the form of beds

for practical reasons. The image of the standing hippopotamus goddess is familiar in Egyptology. She is a hybrid creature combining features of a hippopotamus, a lion and a crocodile. This is the form of the goddess, Taweret (Thoeris) (fig. 33). She appears in all kinds of contexts in Egyptian religion but especially protecting pregnant women. Apparently the bloated body of the hippo reminded the Egyptians of a pregnant woman. An image of this goddess with a crocodile is not unusual. In the *Book of the Faiyum*, the familiar image of the hippopotamus goddess in the form of a funerary bed has apparently been transformed to show now the crocodile on the back of the hippo. She is "*Neith, the Great, Protector of her son, the First of her forms (Akhemu) in the middle of the Lake.*" Neith, the goddess of Sais, is well known as the Mother of Sobek. In this aspect, she has the appearance of a hippopotamus. Her "embodiments" in the Lake are likewise hippos. In the three-part birth



Fig. 32: The upright hippopotamus goddess – actually part hippo, lion and crocodile – stands for the funerary bed with the hippopotamus head. Here, she is called “Great Goddess, Neith, who protects her son.”

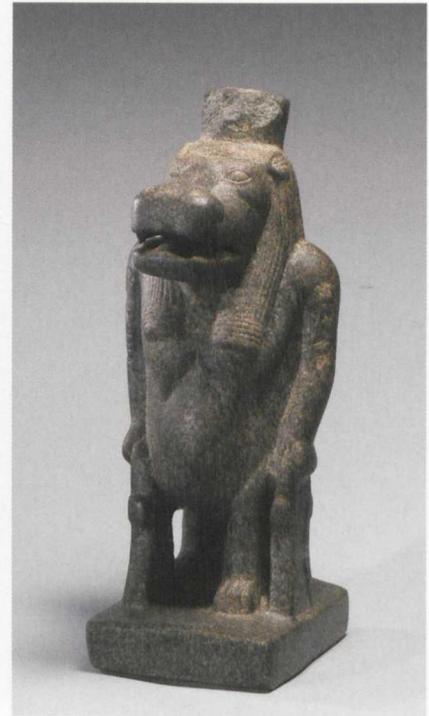


Fig. 33: The Goddess Taweret (Thoeris). Baltimore, Walters Art Museum 22.223. Granit. From Xoïs, ca. 180–100 BC. Ht. – 20 7/8 inches.

process, she apparently performs the function of absorbing the god up into herself.

The god who is standing in front of Neith is completely unknown from other contexts (fig. 34). According to the text about Neith, he is “*the first of his embodiments (Akhemu).*” It is difficult to see in him a hippopotamus though. The head is similar to the hippo at his right, although that figure also does not look much like the real animal either. The tail is much too long – more like a lion’s tail. The body is covered with scales, and it appears to only have one leg. He holds two snakes in front of himself like a bashful visitor with a bouquet of flowers.

It is much easier to recognize the figure after the next one, since here we really have a funerary bed (fig. 35). It is a bier with the head of a lioness. A crocodile-headed god rises up out of the bed. It is important to note that the god rises out of the bier. He does not stand behind it – otherwise we would see his

legs. This bier is one of the most common representations in Egyptian religion. Normally, the mummy lies on it and is administered to by the jackal-headed Anubis. In the three-part birth sequence, the funerary bed guarantees that the deceased is well cared for.

The standing figure called “First of Per-wer” (The First of the Great House) apparently belongs to the lioness bark because he also has a lion’s head (fig. 36). Unfortunately, we know nothing else about him.

The last figure on the left in the oval representing the Lake, thus in the East, is the crucial image pertaining to the regeneration and rebirth of the sun god (fig. 37). Iconographically, it is connected to the image of the child between the horns of the cow – such as is seen in Chapter 17 of the *Book of the Dead*. In reliefs that decorate the walls of the Temple of Hibis, where there are also representations of the Faiyum, for example, the Celestial Cow is shown with the child between her horns (cf. fig. 27). It is significant



Fig. 34: The "First of his Akhemu."

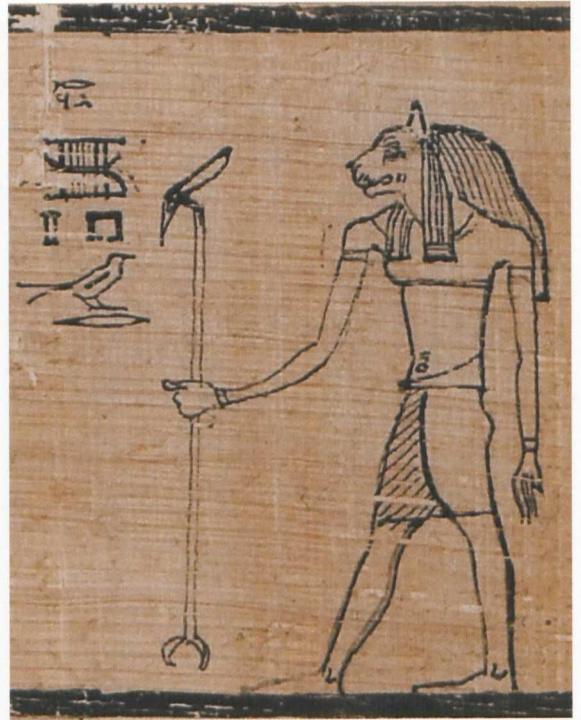


Fig. 36: The "First of Per-wer"



Fig. 35: The lion bier and the crocodile-headed god, who is rising from it.

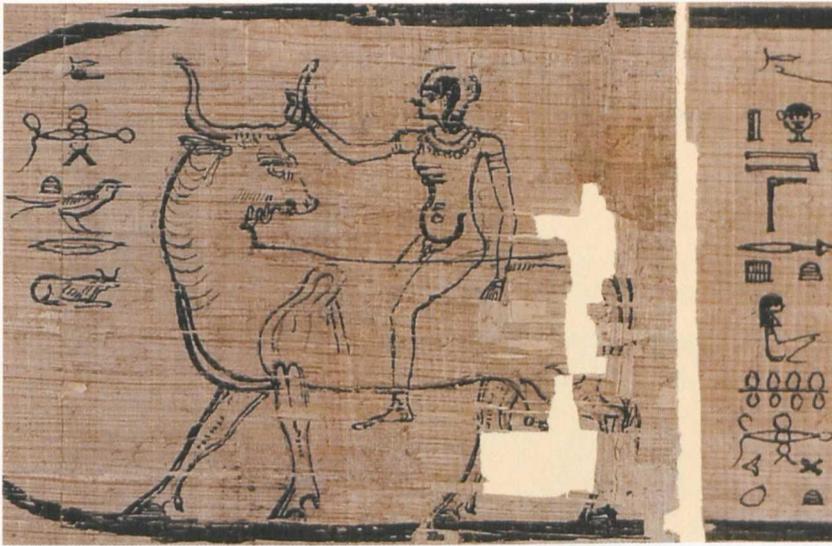


Fig. 37: The Celestial Cow raises the young sun god to the sky.

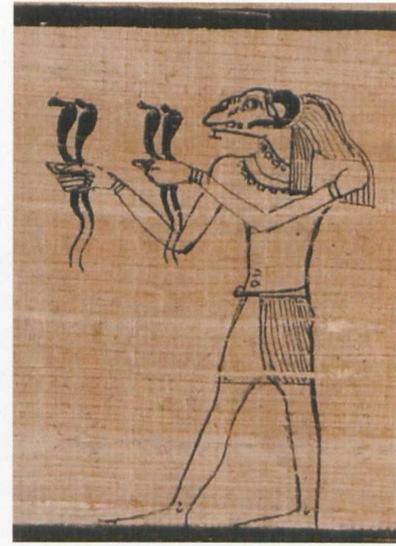


Fig. 38: The “Lord of the Thrones”

that the cow ascends together with the child. This is comparable to representations at the end of the sun god’s travel through the Underworld, when he has to be lifted up by the gods to the sky. This process is necessary for the god to come out of the depths of the earth to be reborn in the morning in the East. In the *Book of the Faiyum*, the lifting work is the task of the Celestial Cow. Here, the movement of elevation is something that we can actually see, since the white Celestial Cow, who ascends to the sky in the morning, is embodied in the early morning haze or sometimes fog and was believed to carry the sun upwards. It was particularly at the beginning of the season of inundation (summer), when the heat in Egypt was strongest, that the condensation of moisture in the air would have been at its most palpable. The formation of mist can still be observed today over a large body of water in the early morning in the hot months. If we imagine in addition to that the kind of effect the seasonal floodwaters would have had on the parched earth, it is easy to see how the Egyptians came to conceive of the Celestial Cow rising up on the first day of the inundation of the Nile. A figure sitting on the back of the Celestial Cow has the same meaning as the image of the deceased on the funerary bed with a cow’s head. The bier will give

birth to the deceased again. The significance of this belief is shown especially clearly in some royal tombs of the New Kingdom, in which the walls are decorated with text and representations from the *Book of the Celestial Cow* in its New Kingdom version. This text explains why a king departs from earth – that is, why he dies. It is that he has succumbed to fate of his own free will, because he has become angry at his people. Willingly, he now ascends to the sky and from there, like the sun god, proceeds on his way in eternal light. The cause for the departure of the king (and sun god) is blamed on the people and the gods who conspired against him. It is the guilt, which necessarily must be placed on someone so that the myth is fulfilled.

The text written alongside the Celestial Cow was not correctly copied. It can only be understood through parallels in Hieratic papyri: “Mehet-weret is raising the Great God.” The text under the words “the Great God” already belongs to the image of the standing god to the right, next to the Celestial Cow. This god is called “Lord of the Thrones” and is “the protector of Meheweret” (fig. 38). In his hands, he holds four snakes, somewhat reminiscent of the “First of his Akhemu” (see fig. 34). It is possible that all three of the gods who are standing next to the animal biers act as protective forces of these funerary beds.

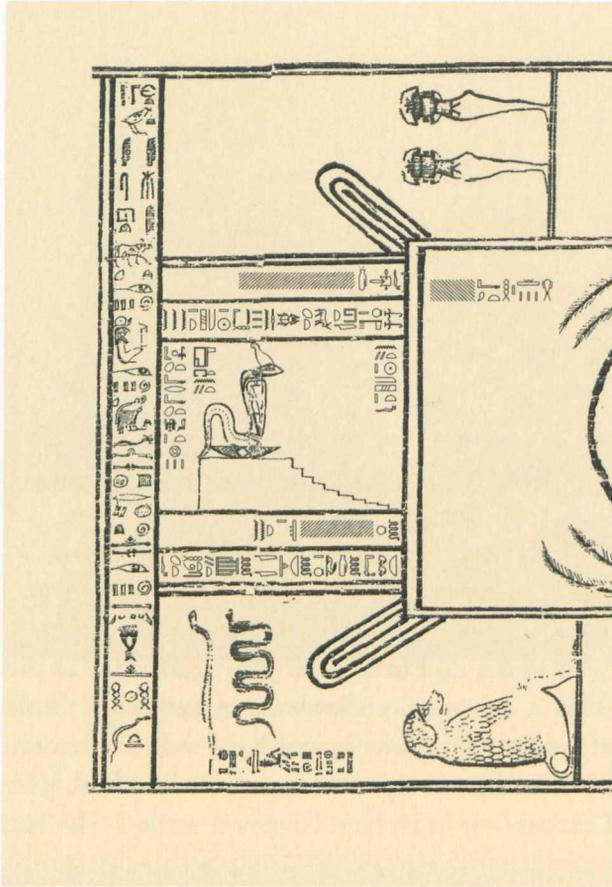


Fig. 39a: Reconstruction of the left (Eastern) side of the Lake.

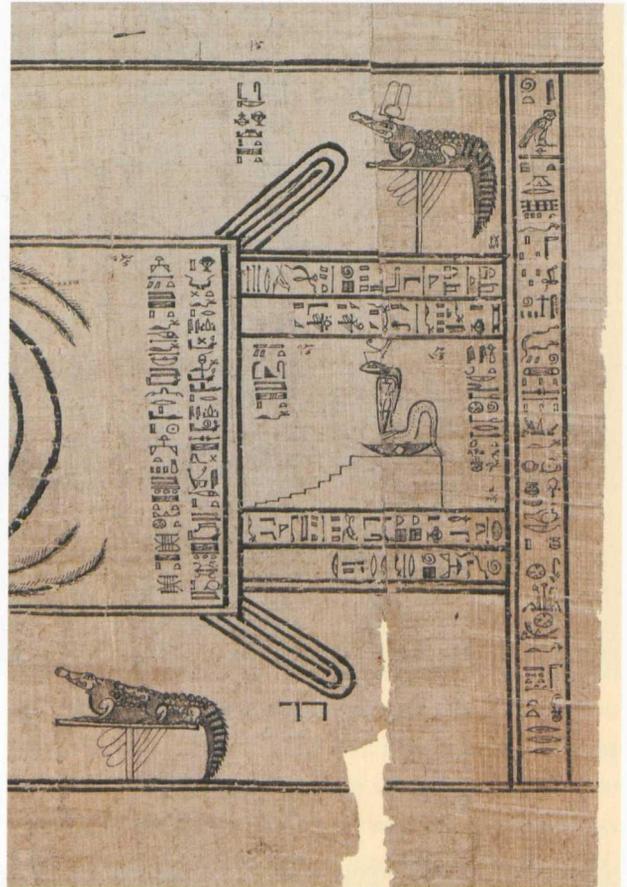


Fig. 39b: The better preserved right (Western) side of the Lake.

The Shore Zones

Placed outside of the oval in the center of the third section of the papyrus are geographical sites with their gods. We cannot say what kind of places these are supposed to be, whether they were real, existing localities or imaginary ones. In any case, these places

are arranged according to their cardinal directions around the central area.

The East side is the part of the papyrus where most is destroyed. Only a few remains of the hieroglyphs and a few traces of the illustrations are

preserved here. But on a papyrus discovered a few years ago in Copenhagen, the text, at least, is about 90% preserved. This parallel allows us to reconstruct the illustration, and we see that the Eastern region looked exactly like the West (fig. 39). In the center was the image of a cobra in a basket resting on top of a podium. This cobra is the Upper Egyptian component of the Two Serpents, who represent the South and the North of Egypt. As the Upper Egyptian serpent, the goddess Nekhbet (otherwise a goddess in the form of a vulture), is found on this papyrus in the East. This picture follows the Egyptian scheme of South and East – the origins of the Nile and the sun – being interchangeable, as are North and West – the directions towards which the Nile river and the sun move. One facet of the text that must be restored here is particularly interesting. It says that, upon the birth of the sun god from Mehet-weret, other gods were also born. These are characterized as snakes, which were the most ancient form of all gods. Presumably there were a total of seven of these gods, but not all their names are preserved. To the right of the destroyed area of the papyrus, near the curve of the central oval, is a legal text that recognizes the inner region of the Faiyum and its gods. Beneath the destroyed area, a text written in part cryptographically labels the bottom part of the papyrus as *“the shore of the lake of the god, Tatenen...”* A small damaged area in the papyrus prevents us from knowing whether the large baboon was meant as a cryptographic sign that should be “read” or whether it was just meant to be an illustration. The counterparts to this baboon at the top part of the papyrus are two mummy-like figures who have a scarab beetle for a head! Perhaps they are a writing for the god’s name “Khepri.”

The west (left) side of this section of the papyrus is completely preserved. The serpent seated on a throne here is the goddess Wadjet, a protective goddess who represents the North of Egypt. She wears the Lower Egyptian crown and is called *“the Lower Egyptian uraeus serpent of Sobek in his lake.”* The place where she sits is described as *“the place of the corners (or: of the courthouse) of the lake (Wadj-wer) on its four sides:*

South, North, West, East. It is the place where *“the Great God sets down, trampling down his enemies who are before him. ‘Judge’ is his name ...”* Just as the East is the place of sunrise, the West is the place of sunset – a place where judgment of the enemies of the sun god occurs. Judgment does not have the same meaning as for us today, where right or wrong is decided. “Judgment” here means the imposition of the appropriate punishment. The enemies are massacred, and their blood tinges the sky in the evening, just as it does in the morning. Here, too, we are faced with a text with a legal tone, since it documents the situation that has resulted from the judgment of the sun god. It says: *“The attack has been repelled; the attack has been withstood due to the eye (of the sun god) there. Defeated is the tortoise on Judgment Day by him who is in his lake. He has created protection. There is no end to the Day of Judgment in the land of the Lake...”*

At the Northern (lower) as well as the Southern (upper) edges of the third section of the papyrus, places with their local gods are listed (fig. 40–41). Judging by the gods who are mentioned, these places collectively refer to all of Egypt, although they are not detailed with total accuracy. They are not the classical places that are named here. That is why the meaning of the list remains unclear. At the end of the bottom edge, 42 nomes, or provinces, of Egypt and 24 of the Faiyum are named, but the significance of these numbers is a matter of controversy.

The last place along the upper border of the papyrus features a local form of Isis called Nepherses. Facing her, atop a standard is *“Sobek in the middle of the island of the lake.”* The last text along the bottom border of the papyrus has no illustration, unless we combine the text which mentions *“The Two Gods of Wadjet”* with the lively drawing to its right of two crocodiles lying alongside each other.

The gods on the Northern and Southern shores of the Lake of the Faiyum differ in certain respects from the images that are known from Egyptian iconography elsewhere. For example, crocodile-headed gods replace the accustomed images of Ra and Horus. Such peculiar beings are connected to the religion of the Faiyum, which is oriented around Sobek.

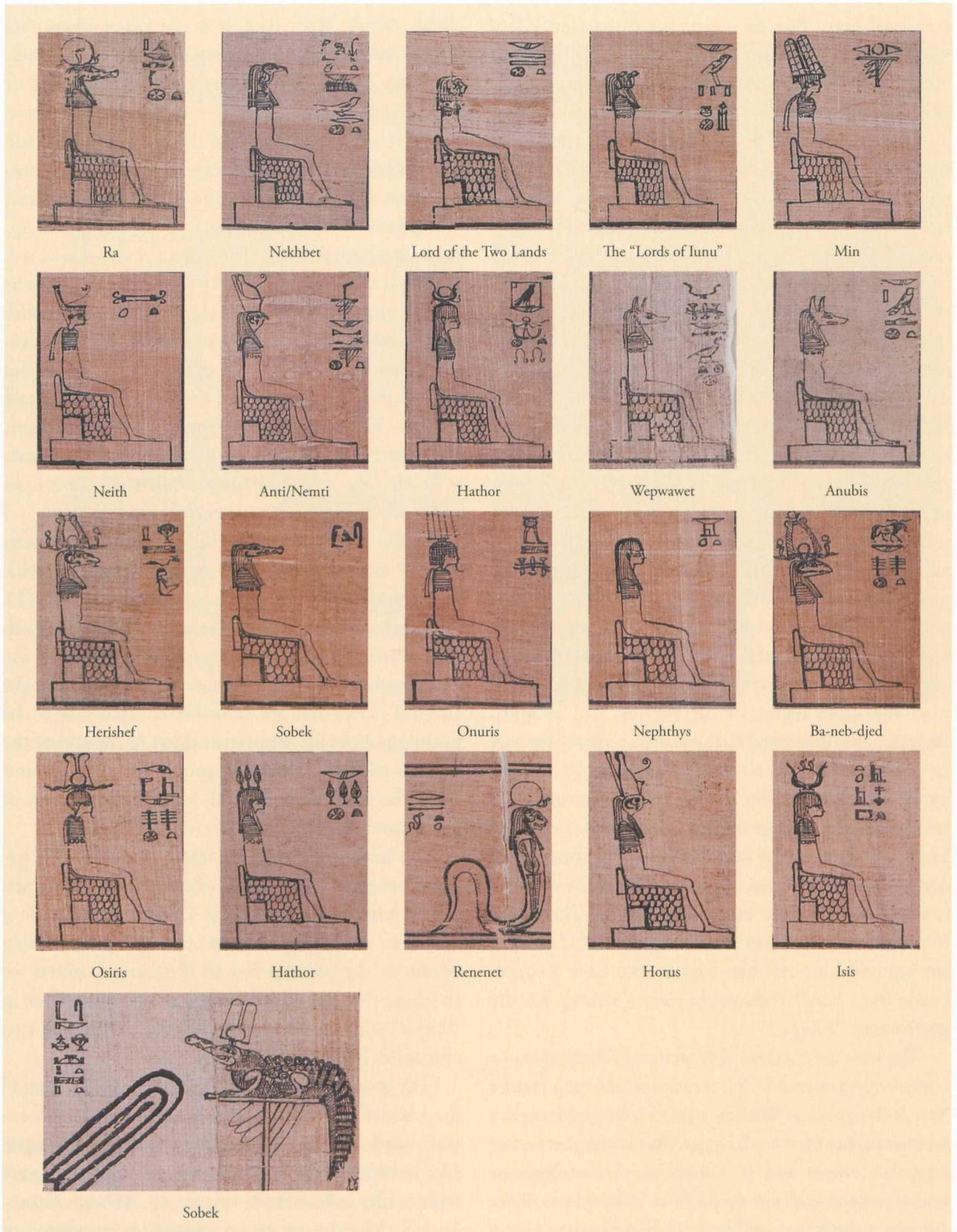


Fig. 40: The gods of the Upper (Southern) Shore

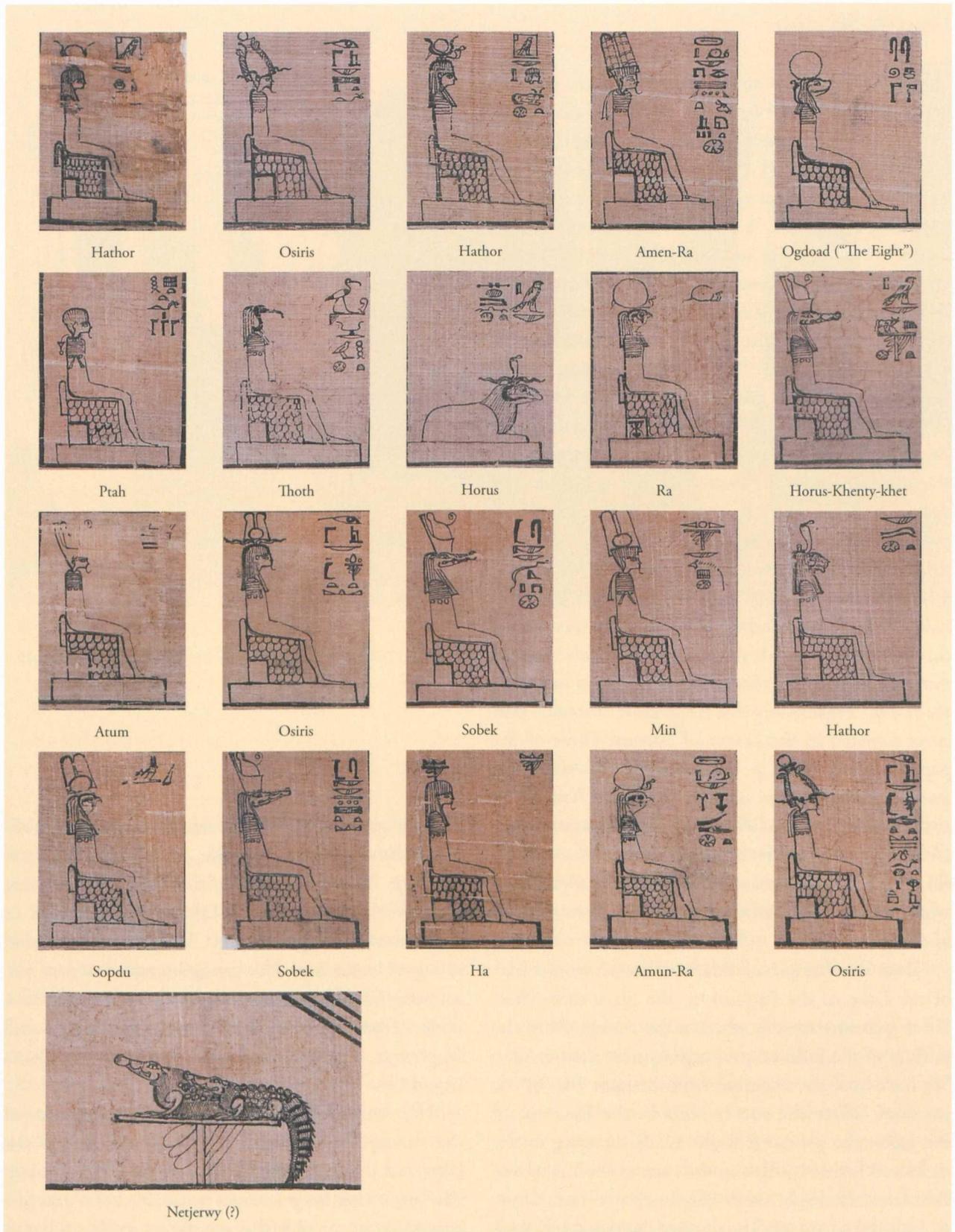


Fig. 41: The gods of the Lower (Northern) Shore

Fourth Section

The second papyrus roll is in a far worse state of preservation than the first. The reason for this could be that it lay in a less favorable position than the first roll, but it could also be due to someone's unknowledgeable treatment of it while rolling it up and preparing it for sale. A large portion of the fourth section of the papyrus has thus been lost. Of the beginning, containing the description of the temples of Krocodilopolis (Shedet), only very scant traces of the illustrations remain. The text has also not come down to us complete, despite the existence of parallel manuscripts in Hieratic script, since the same portions of text are also in destroyed sections in the parallels. So although we know approximately what was represented in the destroyed part, a reconstruction is only possible to a very limited extent. The pictorial fields begin again with a text concerning the sustenance of the crocodiles, which stand for the gods of Egypt. Shortly before that would certainly have been a large standing crocodile. The text about this crocodile gives his name: "*Ikheseesef, who emerges from the deep, it is Sobek of Shedet, the son of Neith, the Great.*" Presumably this is the same crocodile that is represented in the center of Section Three of the papyrus. This place is "*the temple of Ikheseesef, who emerges from the deep, it is Ra, the son of Nut. It lies next to the Temple of Horus of Shedet, to its north. "Mirror," one says to it, or "Place of the Baboon."* It is the place where the primeval Eight Gods see the sun god of the horizon (Ra-Harakhte), as he rises from this lake as out of its mystery."

Thus the Temple of Ikheseesef stood at the East of the Lake of the Faiyum, at the place of sunrise. Yet it was necessary to observe the sunrise from the middle of the Lake to properly witness the mystery. We have here the situation from Section Two of the papyrus, where the sun is born in the East out of the Lake, the primeval Eight Gods standing to the right and left of it. Also in the case of the Temple of Ikheseesef, the Eight Gods (Ogdoad) are incorporated into the narrative. They praise the rising sun with the words: "*May his body and his property endure be-*

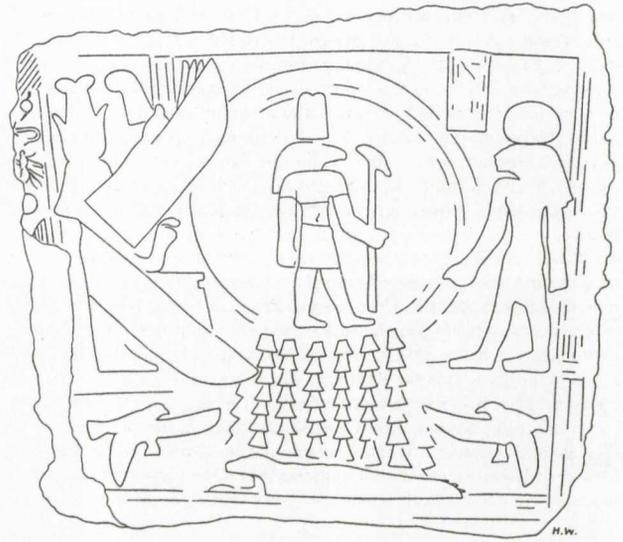


Fig. 42: The sun god brings the crocodile mummy to life with its rays (Qasr Qarun).

fore him daily. May his arms (the sunbeams) be on the lake, bringing Ikheseesef to life, he who emerges from the deep, Sobek, the Lord of Secret Places." We can imagine these Bringing-to-Life events as shown in a picture from Qasr Qarun. The crocodile-headed sun god in the sun disk sends its rays down to the mummy of the crocodile, which is mourned by two birds of prey (symbols of Consecration), Isis and Nephthys, to his left and right, as is done for Osiris (fig. 42).

Here begins the path of the sun over the sky of the Faiyum. Its crocodile body has remained in the lake, and the two will reunite with it in the evening. The sun's rays keep contact with the Lake and the crocodiles there. All the important gods of Egypt have their own crocodile form in the Lake of the

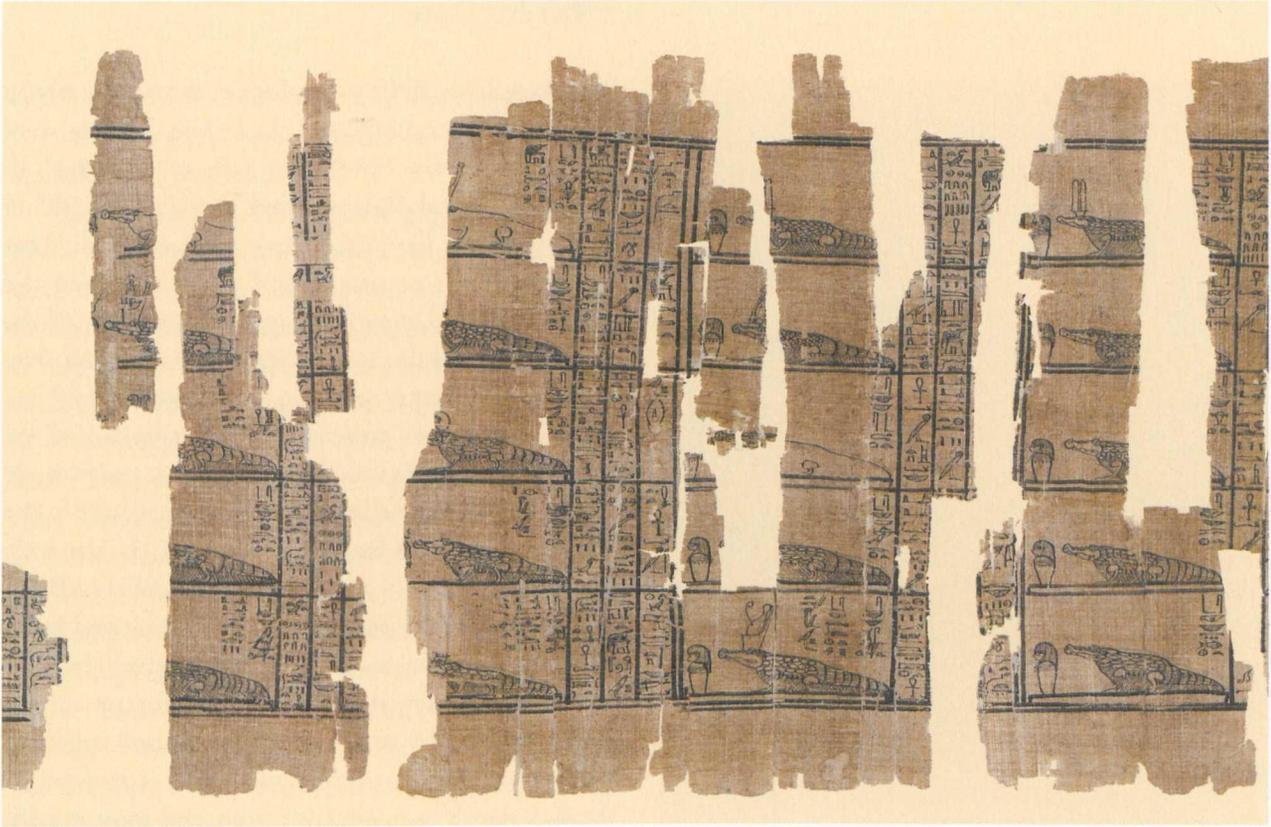


Fig. 43: The Litany of the Crocodiles with the Gods of the Lower Egypt

Faiyum. Here the Faiyum assumes a central place of importance in Egypt. The gods receive nourishment in their crocodile form.

There follows a large vignette, which illustrates in the form of a table all the gods of Egypt and lists in the text accompanying each the kind and amount of offerings each crocodile is to receive (fig. 43). For the first Upper Egyptian nome, home of the ram god Khnum, who guards the sources of the Nile, it says, for example, *“This is Sobek, Lord of the Two Caves that are the source of the Nile. He is given 10,620 hetep-offerings and 365 djefau-offerings. He lives from the fish next to Sobek in his Lake.”* In principle, all major deities of Egypt receive the same. Cursed or banished gods are left out. Sobek of Shedet is the main figure among these crocodiles. Together with them, he steps into

the depths of the lake and battles his foes, the fish. The text describes Sobek, *“thereby, he has gripped his weapons in his fists and (he has) the head of a ram. His heart is satisfied on Judgment Day.”* One can imagine a crocodile with a ram’s head, but perhaps otherwise he had a human body so that he could grab the weapons in his fists.

In the following text, the importance of the Faiyum as the center of Egypt is described. Among other things, the distance from Aswan to the Faiyum is given as $61 \frac{2}{3}$ Iteru, which is about 483 miles. Such statistics – especially the use of fractions – implies that the land was measured exactly. Following this statistic is the description of Egypt in its North-South and East-West extent. Such data were undoubtedly preserved in the “House of Life”.



Fig. 44: The diagram of the “House of Life of Ra-sehet”. Left, severely damaged, on top the central building with the Osiris sanctuary, below it the four subsidiary buildings of the “House of Life”. In the middle of the fragment is illustrated, above, the “Broad Hall of the Gods” and, below, the “Broad Hall of Things.” On the right is seen, above, the cryptographic motto of the “House of Life” and beneath it the “Text of the (Female) Vulture.”

Fifth Section

The *Book of the Faiyum* catalogues three large places in detail: Krocodilopolis (Shedet) in Section 4 of the papyrus, the “House of Life of Ra-sehet” in Section 5, and the place called “Acacia of Neith” in Section 6. We have to assume that either all three places together or just one of these three was the impetus behind the planning and execution of the *Book of the Faiyum*. It is unlikely that the initiatives came from another place in the Faiyum which receives little or no mention in the papyrus. Of the three places highlighted in the papyrus, only one of them could be considered a learned institution: the “House of Life of Ra-sehet” (fig. 44). It was only possible in this “House of Life” to collect all the information about the Faiyum, evaluate it and bring it together in one comprehensive treatise. Here the archivists, theologians and scribes – that is, all the necessary skilled personnel – convened together. The important role of this institution is stressed by the fact that it is named as the second most significant place after Krocodilopolis. Thus when something is said in the *Book of the Faiyum* about the “House of Life of Ra-sehet”, the information comes from an insider.

The location of the “House of Life of Ra-sehet” is described in the *Book of the Faiyum* thus: “It is situated at the north side on the edge of the wetlands as a part of the great Lake of Wadj-wer.” Wadj-wer is to be understood as a large body of water with the green zone on the shoreline. This green zone comprises papyrus, reeds, trees and other plants, which severely impede penetration. This region is the area of retreat for crocodiles and hippopotami, all in all an uncanny region for the Egyptians. There, where this terrain comes to an end, that is, presumably where the lake merges directly into the desert edge, is where the place called “House of Life of Ra-sehet” was probably located. North of this, according to information in the text, are acacias – that is, plants that do not need much water and could thrive at the desert edge. On the basis of this information, it appears that this place could have been situated in the vicinity of the

Greek Karanis (Kom Aushim), or that it was perhaps even the Egyptian name for this temple precinct or forerunner of this structure.

The “House of Life” was an Egyptian institution which was and remains cloaked in considerable secrecy. Aside from the description in the *Book of the Faiyum*, there exists only a description of the “House of Life” of Abydos within a ritual in Papyrus Salt 825 (see fig. 45). In both cases, there is a drawing that can be understood as a ground plan. Judging by these, both “Houses of Life” were constructed very similarly. There is a central structure with the mummy of the ancestor of the principal god, such as Osiris or Geb, in the center. This mummy lies at the point of intersection of the four cardinal directions and the vertical directions to the sky and to the Underworld. In the “House of Life of Ra-sehet”, there is also the direction below to the primeval water body. This central structure is extraordinarily secret. No one is allowed to see the inside, “only the sun.” This center is surrounded by a court, the “Broad Hall of the Gods.” Here, the gods could be approached through select priests with oracle questions.

This whole area is shielded from the outside by four buildings, each of which has an entrance: one from the North, one from the South, etc. In these buildings, knowledge was pursued, divided according to resources, and the written documents necessary for this research were kept. According to the *Book of the Faiyum*, one resource, for example, is the “Field of Knowledge regarding this Lake: trees, fields, cattle, donkeys, rams, geese, fish and the seasons,” another the “Field of Knowledge regarding the sky, the earth, the Underworld, the Southern territory, the Northern territory, the Winds, the condition of the water, the place of “being high” (perhaps the place that the flood reaches) (fig. 46).

Somewhere in the area was the “Broad Hall of Things” (fig. 47). Presumably, artisans were settled here, since it was devoted to objects that a person needed for his burial. In the illustration on the papyrus can be seen the remaining traces of an image of a “man with his (funerary) equipment.”

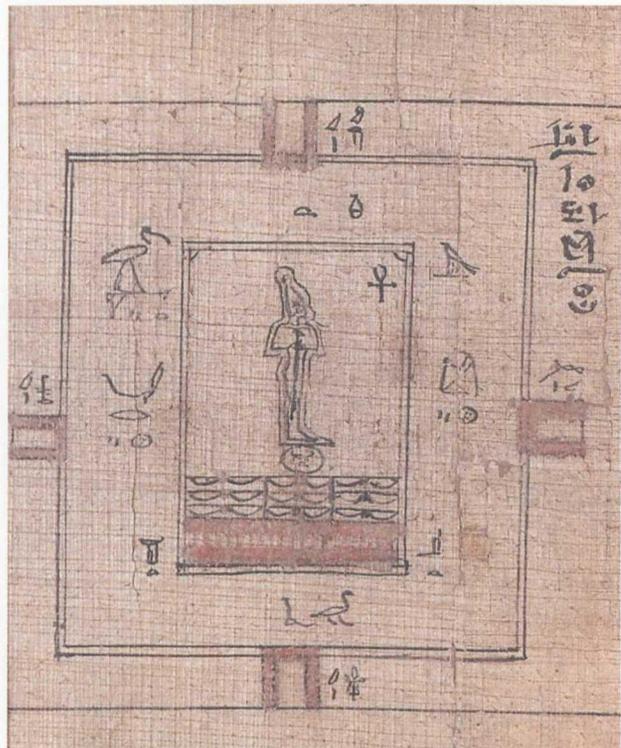


Fig. 45: The central building of the “House of Life” (Papyrus Salt 825) with the sanctuary of Osiris surrounded by the four subsidiary buildings.

Within the diagram of the “House of Life” is a large, cryptographic inscription (fig. 48). This appears to be a motto of the “House of Life”. It says: “Hearing of the Utterances of the First Kings, the Hearing of the Deep, that is the repetition of the rejuvenation in the ocean.” If this statement is also interpreted as a cryptographic writing, it should be translated thus: “The hearing of the things said by the first kings, the hearing of the words - that is the rejuvenation in the ocean.” Evidently, this statement praises the learning of ancient words of wisdom, which promise the reward that one is rejuvenated through them. Such sayings are still familiar to us today from schools and universities, mostly in Latin – which are similar to a cryptic message.

Beneath the inscription is a vignette with the drawing of a (female) vulture. Over her is the beginning of a longer text, presumably an introduction to an oracle

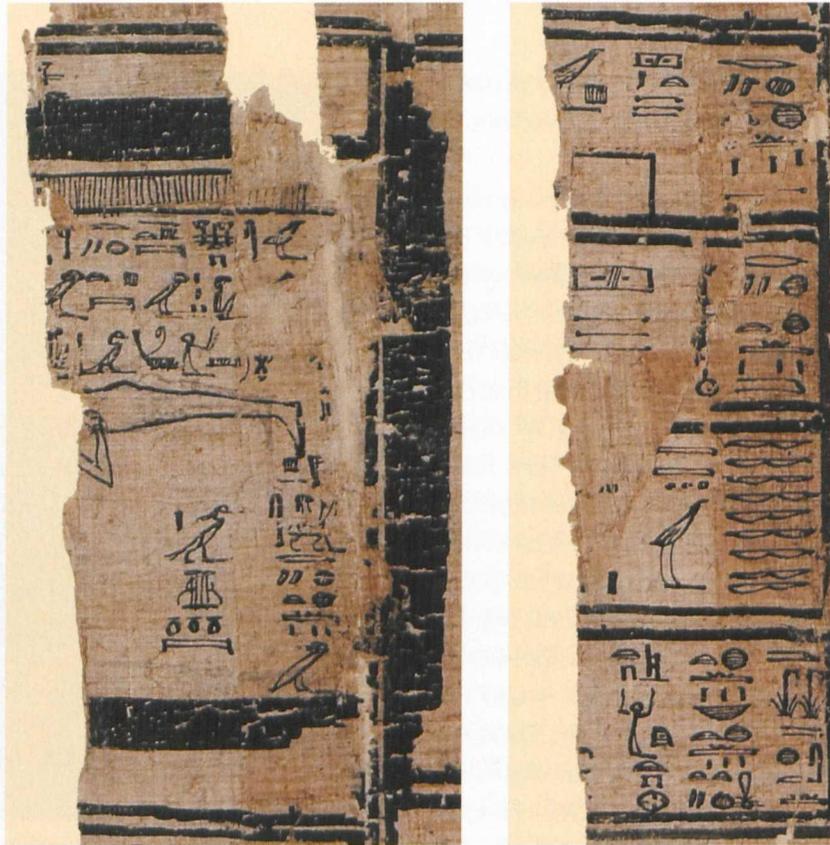


Fig. 46: Left, the central building of the “House of Life of Ra-sehet” (*Book of the Faiyum*) with the Osiris sanctuary (left). Right, four subsidiary buildings of the “House of Life” with the divisions for individual disciplines of learning.

rite that inquires about the length of the king’s reign. It is the “Text of the Lady Vulture.” Here are named the four vulture goddesses who are to come to the “House of Life” from the four corners of the world to spread their wings over the king in protection. Also in other rituals it is shown that the priests in the “House of Life” were of the opinion that their temple was the center of the world. To mention just one example, when it was time for a new Nile flood, it was thought possible from here, in the Faiyum, to summon the inundation, because this was “*the place of the Awakening of the Two Caves that are the source of the Nile.*” Perhaps the formulaic statement that is cited in the text and is

supposed to be spoken twice is precisely the recitation that a priest used to release the floodwaters: “*A great drought is at this place, it is a great drought.*” Usually this worked, since the rising of the Nile happened at the same time every year regardless. In this respect, it is one of the most dependable rivers in the world.

To the right of the picture is a long text, which is not entirely preserved on the papyrus *Book of the Faiyum* (B/H/A). Here, the description of the “House of Life” is outlined again without illustration. We will encounter this sequence – first a large drawing, then the pertinent, longer text – repeatedly in the following sections of the papyrus.



Fig. 47: The “Broad Hall of Things” of the “House of Life of Ra-sehet”. Above is seen the remains of a drawing of an anthropomorphic coffin, under it a slaughtered bull lying on its side (it is shown from below), under that are jars with wine, milk and beer (destroyed) and finally, at the bottom, an offering table with loaves of bread.



Fig. 48: The motto of the “House of Life of Ra-sehet” is particularly noticeable because of its size and the cryptographic writing. Beneath it, the “Text of the Female Vulture” allows a look at the ritual proceedings of the “House of Life”, where, for the benefit of the king, four vulture goddesses are summoned from the four corners of the earth.

Sixth Section

The place “Acacia of Neith” is the third place in the *Book of the Faiyum* that is presented in detail with a large illustration, followed by a text. Unfortunately, its internal connection to the other two places does not emerge clearly from the texts. It is, however, stated about this place that it “*is situated next to the Temple of Sobek, Lord of Ra-sehet,*” and that it is “*next to the Eastern parts of the wetlands.*” It is, of course, impossible to say how far this “next to” is. It could be wall-against-wall or just within range of eyesight. One further reference to this place might be seen in the description of Ra-sehet that there are “*acacias to the north.*” A statement such as this was not supposed to just be a description of the plant growth next to a temple. We may suppose that the place “Acacia of Neith” had something to do with these acacia trees and must lay north of Ra-sehet. In any case, this place cannot be situated too far from the water, since also the tamarisk, reeds and the “Bededu-ka plants in the Lake” play an important role here. Unfortunately, we cannot say what these Bededu-ka plants were. In the drawing of the place, it is clear that it must be understood as an island, or as a mountain that is periodically surrounded by water. The text to this illustration says: “*The sand is on the great Island (or: mountain) in the lake of the Bededu-ka plants.*”

The name of the temple is apparently not totally unambiguous. The text under the illustration calls it

“*Temple of the Acacia, likewise of Neith.*” In the continuous text is written, “*this place, Acacia of Neith is its name.*” We might suppose that this place is located not far from Ra-sehet on an island mountain on which acacias grow. The shoreline is also described: “*The shoreline is overgrown with tamarisks and reed.*” In this place, there is a statue of Neith with her son, made of tamarisk wood. This is the figure that is still partly preserved in the drawing and is described in the text thus: “*Here stands Neith, she has grasped the bow of ...tamarisk wood ... She shoots her arrow of reed, she saves her Horus, who is between her legs, where he has hidden himself.*” In the illustration, this statue is easily recognizable, although about half of it is destroyed (fig. 49). Since the tip of a crocodile’s snout, which is part of the figure of Horus, is preserved, the child can be reconstructed with a crocodile head.

On this island, apparently a ritual was performed “*on Judgment Day.*” Thereby, the king – or more usually a priest who represents him – received the bow and arrow of the goddess, Neith, with a staff of acacia wood. This a staff over six feet in length with a lion’s head as the pommel. The staff even has a name: “*One who completes his lifetime.*” The “Judgment Day” is given as Day 23 of the first month of summer (Season of inundation), which plays a large role throughout the entire *Book of the Faiyum*. The king receives, aside from these insignia, the blossoms from the acacia that are worn as head ornaments.

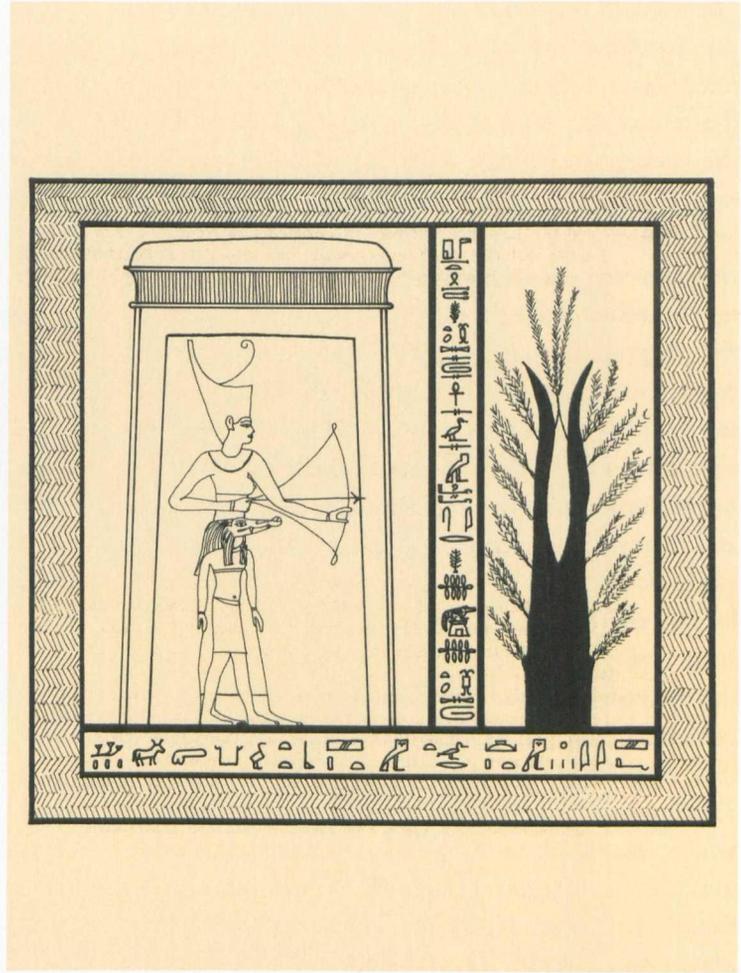


Fig. 49a: The location “Acacia of Neith” is a place where the child god is protected by his mother. The place is represented as an island. Apparently here, rituals were performed for the regeneration of the god and the king.

Fig. 49b: Reconstruction according to the preserved fragments of the papyrus.

Seventh Section

The seventh section of the *Book of the Faiyum* does not represent any place. It is devoted to the myth that relates how the Lake of the Faiyum arose. In the text of the *Book of the Faiyum*, again and again the concept recurs that the Lake of the Faiyum is a temple of Sobek. In the third section of the papyrus and particularly in the closing vignette, reference is made to this equation in pictures. How the temple was founded is represented in the seventh section of the papyrus. In many temples, the ceremony of the temple foundation is represented in a sequence of scenes. First the foundation trench is established by stretching out measuring cords, then the ground is hacked up, the foundation trench is filled with sand, and finally the foundation plaque is laid. In the *Book of the Faiyum*, the measuring cords are spanned out by the eight primeval gods, thus one pair at each corner of the building (fig. 50). More important is the excavation of the foundation trench. What happens next is every builder's fear. They dig so deeply that they reach the ground water and it spurts up. This ground water is the water of the primeval ocean which, according to Egyptian perception, is underground. It emerges above ground and fills up the foundation trench of the "lake." The text of the *Book of the Faiyum* reads: "*They (the primeval gods) have dug (the lake) with their own hands. The primeval ocean came out of it from the depths of millions of millions. Thereby arose Shedet (Krocodilopolis), 'The (one) excavated by both hands,' it is called*".

Because of this story among others, the Greek historian Herodotus gained the reputation of a liar or a storyteller. He reported in the middle of the fifth century from Egypt that the Faiyum was "dug by hand." Only now, about two and a half thousand years later,

it is clear that his version was based on an ancient Egyptian etiology (that is, a story that explains how something came to be the way it is today). Although the *Book of the Faiyum* at the time of Herodotus did not yet exist in its latest form, there did exist in his day an approximately similar tradition that connected the name of the place Shedet with a myth.

The history can be traced back to the hieroglyphic writings of the place name that were common in Late Period Egypt: 

In these, the two identical signs in the middle  represent two hands. Each one individually is read "d" together "dd" or "dt." The first sign at the left  (a vessel or container) is read "shed." Together with the two hands, the word is read "Shedet," which is the Egyptian name of Krocodilopolis. "Shed" alone means, among other things, "to dig." That is why the place name can be understood as "that (which was) excavated by two hands." Herodotus apparently had a very good travel guide, who explained to him much about the Egyptians' beliefs. But since Herodotus had no understanding of the Egyptian language, and apparently no background knowledge, he related the story as he had heard it. Not until later translations are the statement "the lake was dug by hand" expanded to "it was dug by human hands."

Through the digging of the foundation trenches, the lake became a temple. The god Nun (the primeval ocean) filled it up, thereby seizing claim to it, just as every god takes possession of his own temple: The text reads: "*The great Nun is in the (Lake of the) Faiyum. It is his image since this first time. Greatest of the gods is his name.*" With these words, the *Book of the Faiyum* ends; there follows only a final vignette, which serves as a conclusion.

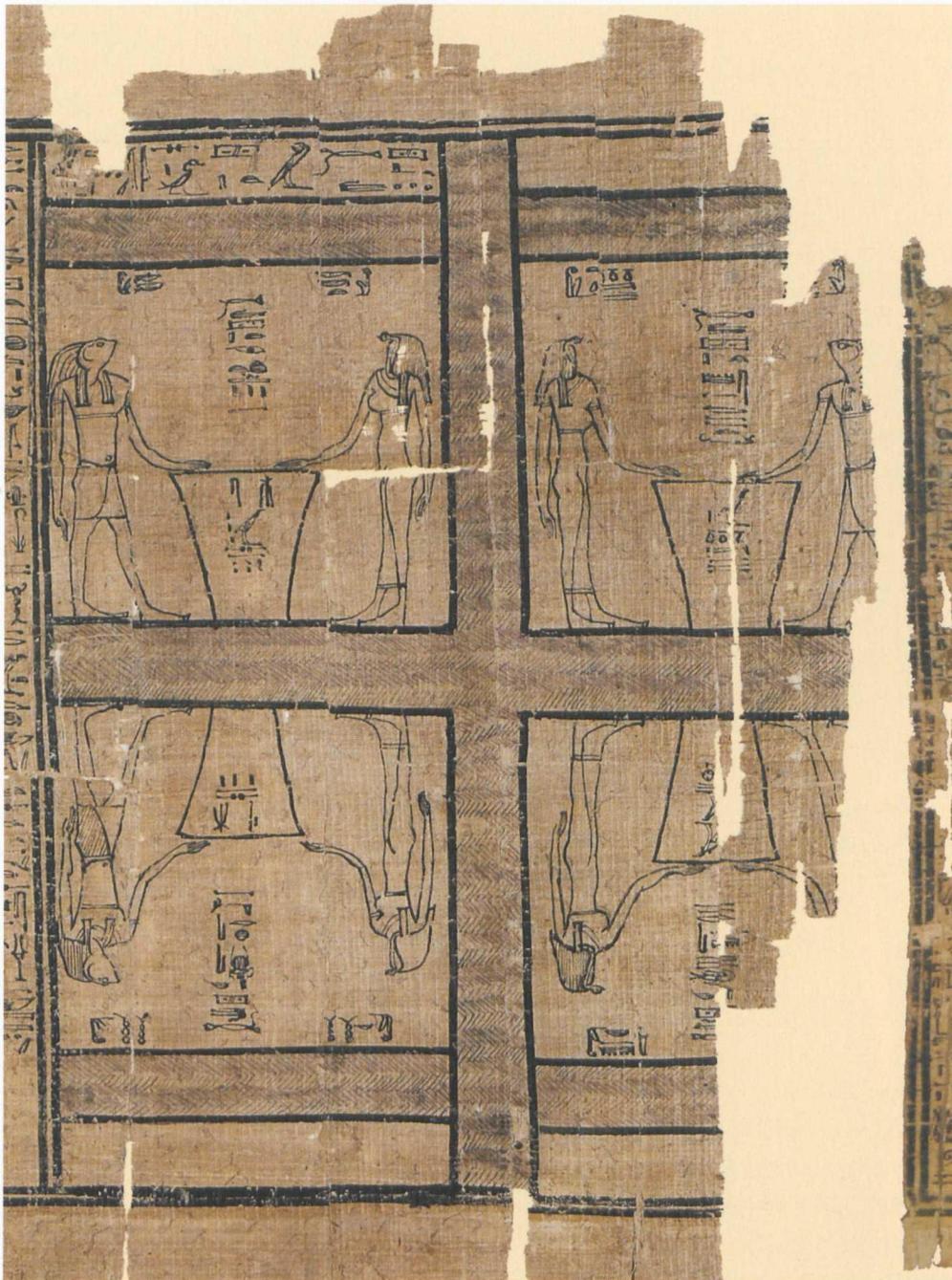


Fig. 50: The Faiyum is founded like a temple. Foundation trenches are dug by the four pairs of primeval gods. They dug down so deep with their hands that the water from the subterranean primeval ocean burst up and filled the lake. The “digging” is represented in the illustration through a large hieroglyph between each divine pair with the meaning “to dig.”

Eighth Section

In the final illustration, the concept of the lake as the Temple of Sobek is summarized one more time (fig. 51). Below, we see a large body of water. It is explained in the two images above it, which presumably can actually be read as text. On the left is a large hieroglyph, which can be read as “temple.” Within it are written the words “*Temple of Sobek of Shedet.*” The second drawing shows a cartouche, or name-ring. This image refers to the elongated shape of the Lake of the Faiyum and to the concept, mentioned in the text, that the most secret of all secrets that one can imagine – the names of the gods – is hidden in the lake. According to Egyptian belief, the real name of a

god is hidden. This name is a key that gives power over the god to the one who knows it. Thus, it is not surprising that these names remain hidden and only the “substitute names” are known. The protection of the name occurs through the name-rings, and the Lake is one such gigantic name-ring. The text in this closing illustration says: “*The name of the sun god, Ra, of Osiris, of Horus and of Pharaoh, it is the Lake.*”

At the very end, in the vertical line on the right, we see the scribe’s notarization that he copied the whole text: “*It is come (to the end), iw-ef pu,*” the scribe punctuating his concluding statement with a well-deserved sigh of relief.

Notes

- 1 For Demotic, see the contribution by Richard Jasnow in this volume.
- 2 Wansleb’s Description of Egypt in 1664, p. 270.
- 3 “Botti A” {2.1,0}; Giuseppe Botti: La glorificazione di Sobk e del Fayyum in un papiro ieratico da Tebtynis. *Analecta Aegyptiaca* 8, Copenhagen 1959, p. 72f.
- 4 It is typical for Egyptian myths to give an explanation for the origin of a contemporaneous situation in prehistoric times.
To do this, a kind of etymology is used that explains the names of places, gods, sacred objects, etc. through stories using similar-sounding main verbs (popular etymology).
- 5 Literally “bull of his mother”. The term “Kamutef” refers to the idea of self-procreation to be reborn again and again.

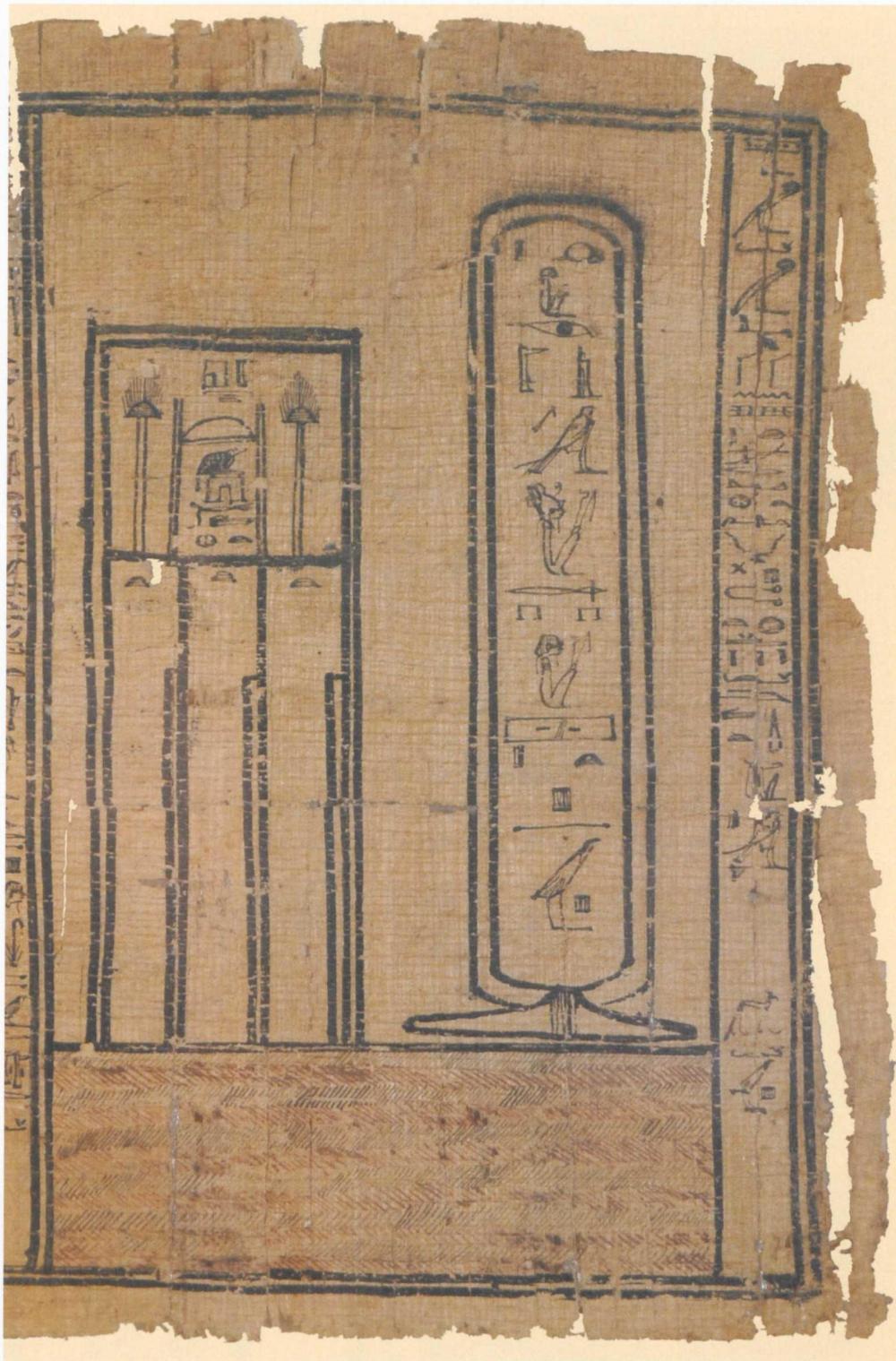


Fig. 51: In the final illustration, large hieroglyphs appear themselves like pictures. They read: *“The lake (below as zigzag pattern) is the Temple of Sobek”* and *“The lake is the protective ring around the names of the gods Ra, Osiris, Horus and the Pharaoh.”*

Overview
of the *Book of the Faiyum*
(Boulaq/Hood/Amherst)

Papyrus

Section 1 — Entrance to the Faiyum,
Bahr Yusef,
wetlands (area that the water can reach)

Section 2 — Entrance to the Faiyum,
wetlands (in the form of a goddess),
East of Lake Faiyum

Section 3 — Lake of the Faiyum

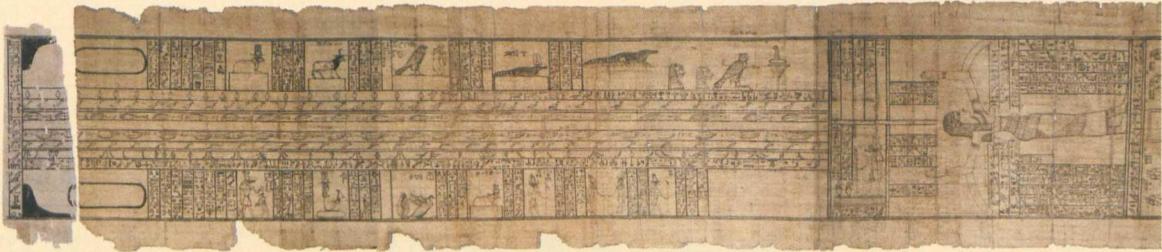
Section 4 — Krocodilopolis/Shedet and related list
of Egyptian gods in crocodile form

Section 5 — House of Life of Ra-sehet

Section 6 — Acacia House of Neith

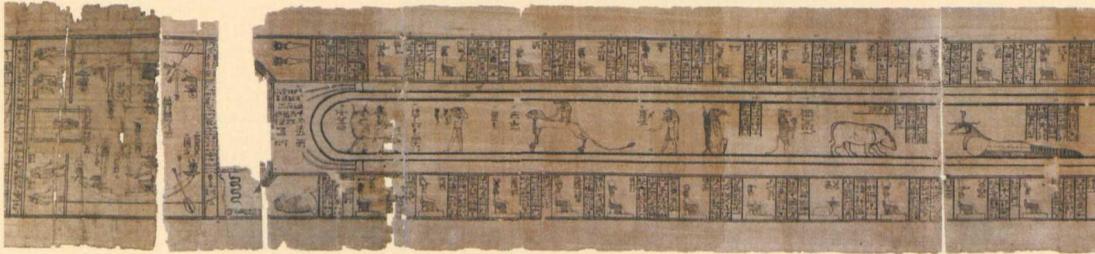
Section 7 — Foundation of the Faiyum

Section 8 — Summary (in form of an illustration)

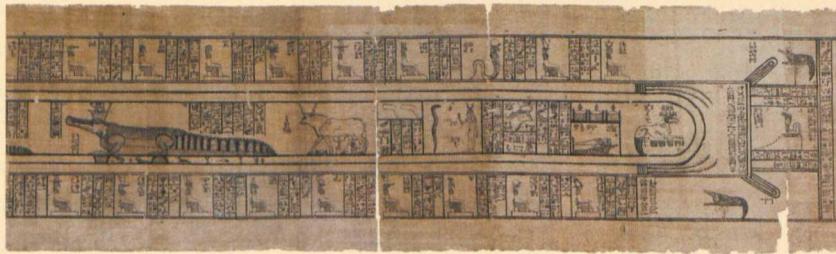


Section 1 of papyrus

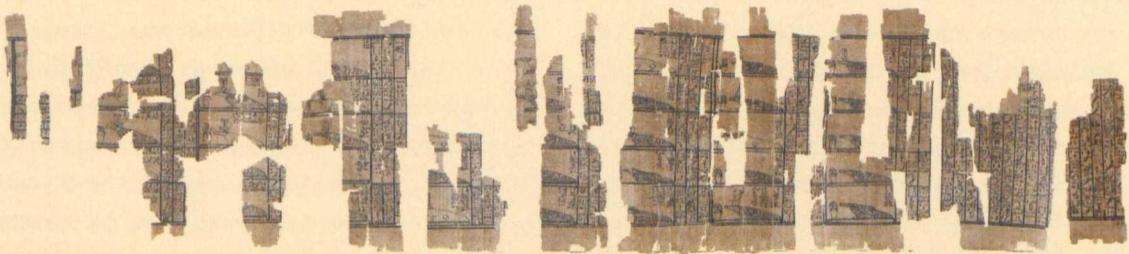
Section 2



Section 3



Section 4 of papyrus



Section 5

Section 6

Section 7

Section 8

Both small papyrus fragments were given to the Walters Art Museum in 2012 by the Pierpont Morgan Library.

— = Boulaq (now in Cairo)
 — = Hood (now in Baltimore)
 — = Amherst (now in New York)