

DEVIL AND GOD: THE CROCODILE IN KUSH

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In el-Hobagi, Patrice found a bronze bowl with a crocodile lying on its bottom.¹ In his interpretation, the crocodile is a reference to the dead king. By pouring libation out of the bowl, the crocodile will appear and be thus in strong connection with recreation. Inspired by Patrice's investigation, I want to expand on these ideas. In the following, I want to present some further thoughts on the crocodile, in the memory of Patrice.

Crocodiles have been represented in the Middle Nile Valley since Prehistoric times, where these animals were shown in rock pictures.² In the C-Group and Kerma-Culture we know only a few representations of crocodiles up to now.³ Nevertheless, we can be sure that they existed and competed with men about who was hunter and who had to be victim. My emphasis in this small investigation will be the Kingdom of Kush, discussing the evidence and the meaning of crocodiles for the Napatan and Meroitic periods.

Representations of the crocodile are visible in several contexts. It is depicted on scarabs and plaques, sometimes crouching three-dimensionally on a scaraboid (Fig. 1).⁴ To defend themselves from the devil animal, the Kushites depicted it and thus sought to repel it magically. An amulet in the form of a crocodile, or with an engraved crocodile, should pacify the dangerous reptile. This form of

1 HBG VI/1/19, P. Lenoble, in D. A. Welsby (ed.), *Recent Research in Kushite History and Archaeology*, p. 175-176.

2 See for example P. Cervicek, *Felsbilder des Nord-Etbaï, Oberägyptens und Unternubiens*, Wiesbaden, 1974, p. 179, fig. 114, 152, 285.

3 G. Steindorff, *Aniba I*, Hamburg/New York/Cairo, Tf. 57.11; W. B. Emery and L. P. Kirwan, *Excavations and Survey between Wadi es-Sebua and Adindan, 1929-1931*, Cairo, 1935, pl. 42; G. A. Reisner, *Excavations at Kerma (Parts IV-V)*, HAS VI, 1923, fig. 285, pl. 71.1.

4 See for example in Sanam: Fr. Ll. Griffith, "Oxford Excavations in Nubia. XVIII-XXV, The Cemetery of Sanam", *AAALiv* 10, 1923, pl. XXI.7, XLV.21, 22, 23, XLVI. 9, 18, XLVIII, 7, 10., 20, L.4, 5, LIV.9.

magical practice is common in the Nile Valley – and maybe beyond: a danger is blocked by visualizing it. To depict the feared animal on a magical object means to stop it.

One of the more complex compositions for visualizing the danger that is to be averted is to depict the animal as already defeated. In Sanam, there are two representations of this type. A metal staff attachment was found in the treasury of Sanam,⁵ showing a god standing on a crocodile and spearing it. It is not clear whether this god has a falcon's head or a ram's head, but it seems in any case to be not a human head. A very interesting detail is that the snout of the reptile is bound with a rope. This is the most effective way to pacify this dangerous beast: to hold its snout very tight.⁶ We can mention the same detail on a plaque of the cemetery of Sanam (**Fig. 2**).⁷ There the king is standing on the crocodile and holding in one hand the rope which secures its snout, while the other hand holds a spear which has already been put into the back of the crocodile. The animal is defeated several times: it is speared, the snout is bound and the king himself is standing on its back.

The production of amulets against the danger of crocodiles continued in the Meroitic period.⁸ But moreover, the evil crocodile is present in cultic surroundings, too. It is shown repressed with the bound snout in the lowest part of the pylon of the Lion Temple in Musawwarat es Sufra and again on a column in the same temple.⁹ In Musawwarat es Sufra we can see the dangerous and not yet pacified beast as well. On two walls of the Great Enclosure the hunting crocodile is shown: on wall 116/115 the reptile starts to snap at an antelope at a water hole. The crocodile is waiting hidden in the water, while the antelope bend down to drink. On wall 115/106 the crocodile was already lucky and successfully hunted a man (**Fig. 3**). The poor victim is shown with his legs and lower parts already in the crocodile, with only his upper body still on earth.

5 *Id.*, "Oxford Excavations in Nubia. VIII-XVII, Napata, Sanam Temple, Treasury and Town", *AAALiv* 9, 1922, pl. LIV.4.

6 It is used even today: the keepers learn to press together both jaws of the animal and to secure its snout with a band for sealing cartons. The impossibility of using its most effective weapon causes the animal to stay still. For crocodile hunting in Sudan with securing of the snout, see T. R. H. Owen, "Crocodile Harpooning in the Bahr el Ghazal", *SNRec* 31, 1950, p. 137-140.

7 A. Lohwasser, "Gefahren lauern überall. Zu den Tiermotiven auf einem Amulett aus Sanam", *MittSAG* 13, 2002, p. 47-58.

8 See the collection given by I. Hofmann and H. Tomandl, *Die Bedeutung des Tieres in der meroitischen Kultur*, Beihefte *BzS* 2, 1987, p. 114-115.

9 Fr. Hintze et al., *Musawwarat es Sufra*, Tf. 79 b, Tf. 93, 101 b, c.

The natural reality, with the crocodile as one of the most dangerous of animals, was reflected in the representations. The Kushites counteracted its presence with magical blocking by means of an amulet, or with assault by means of the bound snout and the spear in the back. The devil should be fended off and the fear of it should be mastered.

But apart from these scenes we can find this animal depicted on pottery without its perilousness.¹⁰ There the crocodile is shown within its natural surrounding: water, its living space, and birds, which live in a symbiosis with the reptiles (**Fig. 4**). The context of the crocodile here is water, a symbol for recreation and fertility especially in a desert area. This aspect is put forward intensively in the Meroitic period. From the late Meroitic and early Postmeroitic period, there exist some bronze bowls showing a crocodile sitting on the inner bottom of the bowls.¹¹ If the liquid is gone, the animal appears, like the real crocodile in the dried up wadies.

An unpublished offering tray from Gebel Adda shows two crocodiles crouching at its rim.¹² An oval offering plate of the grave of Baskakaren, a late Napatan king, can be interpreted as a forerunner: there is a crocodile sitting at the rim (**Fig. 5**).¹³ This kind of basin-with-crocodile is now paralleled by an object found recently in Kawa.¹⁴

Since the crocodile lives on land, but is very much dependent on water, the appearance of the reptile guarantees humidity, water, and therefore fertility. This positive aspect results in the understanding of the crocodile as a god-like animal – the other side of this ambiguous creature.

First of all, a group of Napatan plaques from Sanam shows the crocodile in connection with the sun-pavians.¹⁵ One or two pavians with sun-discs squat under a canopy which is formed by the reared bodies of two uraei (**Fig. 6**). Under the apes a *nb*-basket or *nbw*-sign can be shown, and under that there is a crocodile. Twice the upper top, too, is made by a (upside-down) crocodile. Thus, the crocodile is here in close connection with the sun, adored by the apes.

10 See for example L. Török, "Meroitic Painted Pottery: Problems of Chronology and Style", *BzS* 2, 1987, p. 87-88.

11 P. Lenoble, "'A New Type of Mound-Grave' (continued): le tumulus à enceinte d'Umm Makharoqa, près d'el Hobagi (A.M.S. NE-3-O/7-O-3)", *ANM* 3, 1989, p. 93, pl. IXb, XIIb; *id.*, in D. Welsby (ed.), *Recent Research in Kushite History and Archaeology*, p. 175-176, n. 129.

12 *Ibid.*

13 D. Dunham, *Nuri*, p. 219, fig. 169.

14 D. Welsby, in D. Welsby and J. R. Anderson (eds.), *Sudan Ancient Treasures*, p. 155, no. 139.

15 Fr. Ll. Griffith, *AAALiv* 10, 1923, pl. Ll.1, 3, 4, 5.

Very interesting are two other plaques, engraved with the figure of Amun of Pnubs – a criosphinx lying under a tree – and a crocodile, crouching beneath the criosphinx (**Fig. 7**).¹⁶ It was Eleonora Kormysheva who rightly pointed out that it cannot be the Egyptian god Sobek, but rather a Kushite deified crocodile that is depicted here.¹⁷

The connection between Amun of Pnubs and a crocodile(-god) is strengthened by a recently published seal (**Fig. 8**).¹⁸ It was found in Meroe by Garstang and has the hieroglyphs *pr Jmn-R* “house of Amun-Re” on the sealing plate. It implies that this seal was the official sign for ownership of the temple of Amun-Re, most plausible in Meroe.¹⁹ On the upper side of the seal, there is a cache in the form of a wire pyramid. Inside this pyramid there are two three-dimensional figures shown: Amun of Pnubs (the ram-headed lion) and a crocodile. These two creatures are presented on the same level, crouching one next to the other in the cage. Therefore we can interpret them as balanced and equally potential at least in this representation. But it should be assumed that on the plaques, too, both of them are to be understood in parallel, whereas in the two-dimensional representation they are reproduced as one above the other.

The famous bronze bowl of Gammai shows a priest standing in front of several gods (**Fig. 9**).²⁰ One of these gods is a crocodile, wearing a crown and sitting on a podium. On this bowl, Amun as a ram and the crocodile are depicted in an antithetic composition. Both are lying on a podium. Finding the crocodile as an equal (and not subordinate) counterpart of Amun on the seal and on the Gammai-bowl, I would conclude that in these cases the crocodiles are representations of a god. In the background of the Gammai-crocodile on the podium, five stems of papyrus are shown. These represent the swamps and therefore water and fertility, as is visualized in the pottery. Maybe this anonymous god is a kind of Nile god or at least a guarantee of fertility.

The crocodile – or anonymous crocodile-god? – is depicted not only together with Amun, but with other gods, too. On several rings, found in Meroe, we can

16 *Ibid.*, pl. XXVII.47, LIII.10.

17 E. Kormysheva, in D. Welsby (ed.), *Recent Research in Kushite History and Archaeology*, p. 287.

18 F. Welsh, “A bronze seal from Meroe in the Petrie Museum, London”, *JEA* 88, 2002, p. 243-246.

19 Therefore, I cannot agree with the interpretation of Kormysheva (in D. Welsby (ed.), *Recent Research in Kushite History and Archaeology*, p. 287) that the crocodile is not found associated with Amun of Pnubs in official temple iconography.

20 O. Bates and D. Dunham, “Excavations at Gammai”, *HAS* 8, 1927, p. 40, pl. L.1, LXV.4.

see the reptile in connection with other animals (Fig. 10).²¹ These are falcons, lions, and a row of gods, and again the ram-headed Amun. Both lion and falcon are animals of the king and forms of prominent gods, namely Apedemak and Horus. The connection between the crocodile and the lion is documented several times.²² There is a graffito in Musawwarat es Sufra which shows a lion above a crocodile; another example is a faience bowl, where both animals are crouching on the rim.²³

I do not want to stress here the depictions of a hybrid, consisting of a falcon head, a lion body and a crocodile tail.²⁴ It is shown on the Lion-temple of Naqa, on a ring of Karanog, and in the temple of Philae. It has its roots in the Egyptian culture, where a lion with crocodile tail is a common form of the god Her-imi-shenut. This hybrid includes a part of the body of the crocodile, but it is not comparable with the dangerous man-eater, or the anonymous fertility god either.

In sum, the crocodile is a multidimensional character. Of course it is the devil, hunting both men and other animals. The Kushites had to protect themselves, using magical objects with depictions of the reptile. Very seldom, complex compositions with a god or king spearing the crocodile and gagging its snout are transmitted. On the other hand, the crocodile is shown as a guarantee for water and fertility. It is painted on pottery together with birds and water, and it is positioned three-dimensionally on the rim of offering trays. It was these very necessary potentials that resulted in the sacralization of the animal. An anonymous crocodile-god on the Gammal-bowl, and the strong connection with Amun of Pnubs, hints at the fact that there existed a godlike aspect of the crocodile. The appearance together with the animal form of Amun as the criosphinx Amun of Pnubs leads to the consideration that animals in Kush had a much deeper sacral anchoring than expected up to now.²⁵

Therefore, we can note that the crocodile in Kush had two aspects: the dangerous beast which had to be pacified, and the god-like animal. The ambiguous character, the devil and the god, is present in one creature.

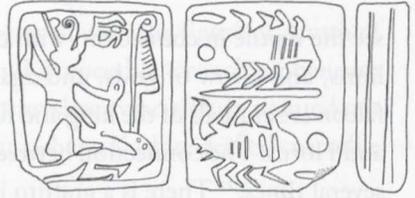
21 D. Dunham, *The West and South Cemeteries*, fig. 92.h, j, k.

22 See for this combination I. Hofmann and H. Tomandl, *Die Bedeutung des Tieres*, op. cit., p. 112-115.

23 J. Garstang, "Fourth Interim Report on the Excavation at Meroe in Ethiopia", *AAALiv* 6, 1914, p. 6, pl. IV.5.

24 L.V. Žabkar, *Apedemak, Lion God of Meroe. A Study in Egyptian-Meroitic Syncretism*, Warminster, 1975, p. 106-117.

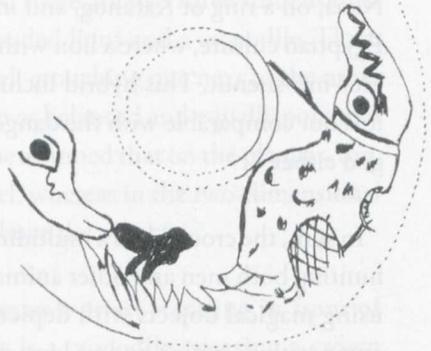
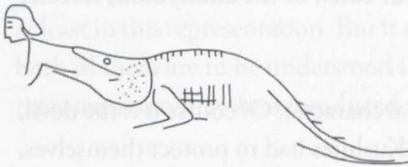
25 See in general I. Hofmann and H. Tomandl, *Die Bedeutung des Tieres*, op. cit.



1. Scarabs from Sanam (after F. Ll. Griffith, « Oxford Excavations in Nubia. XVIII. The Cemetery of Sanam », *AAALiv* 10, 1923, pl. XLV, 21-23)

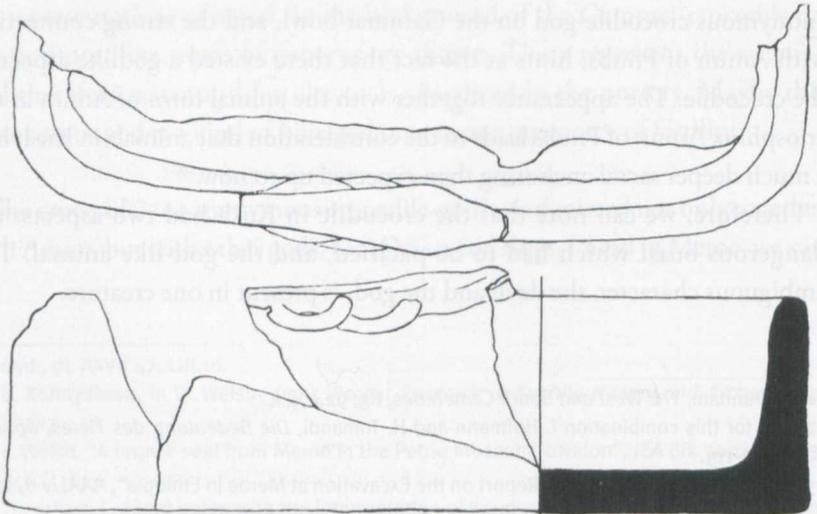
2. Plaque from Sanam (after A. Lohwasser, *MittSAG* 13, 2002, fig. 2)

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3. Graffiti from Musawwarat es Sufra. Crocodile as man-eater (after A. Lohwasser, *MittSAG* 13, 2002, fig. 5)

4. Meroitic pot (after L. Török, *BzS* 2, 1987, fig. 66)



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5. Fragment of an offering basin from King Baskakeren (after D. Dunham, *Nuri*, fig. 169)



6. Plaque with sun-pavians and crocodile (after F. Ll. Griffith, *AAALiv* 10, 1923, pl. LI.1)



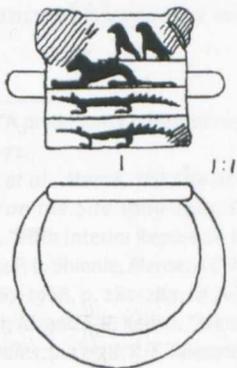
7. Plaque with Amun of Pnubs from Sanam (after F. Ll. Griffith, *AAALiv* 10, 1923, LIII.10)



9. Bronze bowl from Gammal (after O. Bates and D. Dunham, *HAS* 8, 1927, pl. LXV.4)



8 a-b. Bronze seal with Amun of Pnubs and the crocodile, UC 43960 (copyright Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, UCL)



10. Ring from Meroe (after D. Dunham, *The West and South Cemeteries*, fig. 92.k)