

The Ancient Egyptian Conception of Images

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Abstract

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In Ancient Egypt images were very important not only for recording or transferring information, but also because of the magic power they contained. On the one hand they were powerful manifestations of the objects, animals and persons they represented, so that they could function, for example, as a channel for communication between men and gods, and on the other hand they were said to have apotropaic power, which was supposed to guarantee especially that the salutary effect of rituals was permanent by representing the ideal cult action in pictures, or to protect humans from demons, aggressive animals, and all kinds of enemies and dangers. According to the “Bildakttheorie”, images were even said to be able to create reality.

Because of this enormous power it was necessary to keep the usage of images strictly controlled and to separate in particular the statues of gods, keeping them inside the sanctuaries of the temples, away from people’s view, so that the gods were able to inhabit their earthly bodies whenever they wanted to.

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The usage of images

Since the beginning of civilization images have played a decisive role in Egyptian culture. Even the famous Egyptian script has its origin in simple images as nearly every hieroglyph shows a specific (living) thing – in most cases easy to identify. But in spite of their pictorial nature hieroglyphs are not just a pictographic writing system. In fact there is in principle no difference between a pictographic Egyptian sign and the corresponding Latin letter; both are letters with the same phonetic sound. Furthermore, the hieroglyphic system is very complex because many hieroglyphs are not only used as letters for a specific phonetic sound, but can also be read iconically. For example, the hieroglyphic sign in the shape of a horned viper can be used like the Latin letter *f*, but this sign can also be a determinative to

mark that the previous hieroglyphs have to be read as “snake”.

But images and the hieroglyphs for the ancient Egyptians were not only a medium to capture information or to communicate with other people (or their gods), as writing is today; they also thought that every sign inscribed on the walls of temples, tombs, on papyrus and so on was endowed with a special power. Egyptologists assume that for them every image held something like magic power – either good or bad – and every hieroglyphic sign was seen as part of the identity of the object that it represented (Wilkinson 2001, p. 331). This way hieroglyphic forms were seen to be able to function as representations of individuals or even as manifestations of the gods. That is why the ancient Egyptians thought very carefully about which sign to use and which not to use and how to represent it in every single context.

For example, they used hieroglyphic signs in the shape of hostile animals only in a defective way of representation for coffin texts or for the decoration of tomb walls (Fig. 1a,b), so that they were not dangerous for the tomb owner's mummy. Defective writing means, for example, that the represented animals were transfixed by knives or arrows or perhaps carved incomplete or bisected. The same applies to images of convicts or daemons which were always shown in an unthreatening way – injured or bound (Fig. 1c). The origins of this way of representing enemies or dangerous animals are the Pyramid Texts, where we first find intentional mutilation of potentially threatening hieroglyphic signs (Ritner 1993, pp. 157, 164 ff.).

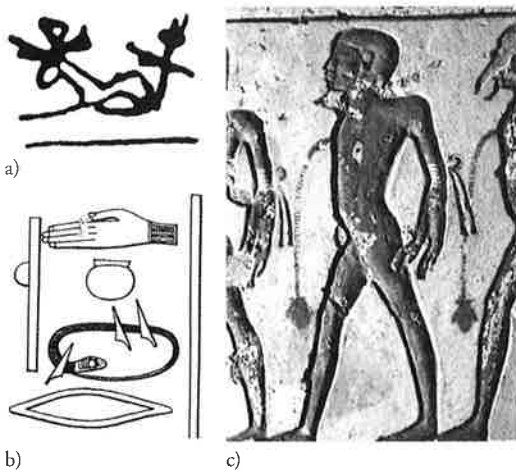


Fig. 1. a) Determinative of god Seth pierced by knives (pBM 10252), after Ritner 1993: 167, Fig. 14f; b) Snake determinative of god Apap pierced by knives, after Ritner 1993: 167, Fig. 14d; c) Enemies headlong, bound and with hearts teared out (tomb of Ramses VI., dynasty XVIII), after Hornung 1983: 162, Fig. 138.

The usage of hieroglyphic signs and all kinds of symbols had nothing to do with simple decoration or playful visual punning. Nearly every reproduction in temples had a magic function. For example, the famous pic-

tures on the front walls of the temples showing pharaoh smashing down the enemies were said to have an apotropaic power (Fig. 2); not only did they demonstrate the supremacy of the king, but they were supposed to keep every enemy away from the house of the gods by the magic power of the image (Arnold 1996, p. 49; Schoske 1982; Vassilika 1989, pp. 2 f.).

Due to this function J. Assmann introduced the *Bildakttheorie* (i.e. image act theory), assuming that the ancient Egyptians thought it was possible to do things with images (Assmann 2004). This theory of course is influenced by the well-known speech act theory of Searle and Austin (Austin 1994; Searle 1963). According to them, doing things with words means that by saying something we *do* something. For example, when a priest joins two people in marriage saying, “I now pronounce you husband and wife” they *are* husband and wife from that point of time onwards. J. Assmann states that the linguistic speech act theory can be transferred to images in order to explain the Egyptian idea of the power of images. He suggests that not only the spoken word but also the written word and even images in Egypt share the same function. According to him, an inscription is



Fig. 2. Pharaoh Ramses III. smashing down the enemies (temple of Ramses III at Medinet Habu). Photo by the author.

a kind of social action as well; inscribed words are nothing else than speech acts conserved in stone. The great advantage of these speech acts made of stone is that they exist detached from any limit of time – at least until eternity (Assmann 1990, pp. 1 ff.).

In a second step he maintains that most of these inscriptions are able to be replaced by images, because they have the same function as written words. Even more than that: they are independent of a specific language. Because of that, I agree with Assmann that it is just a small step from Austin's and Searle's speech act to an image act theory. Instead of a speaker there is an inscription or image, and instead of face-to-face-communication there is reception.

Images in the cultic and magic area

This visual communication played a very important role especially in the cultic area. These pictures generally served to make sure that the salutary effect of the ritual was permanent. The ancient Egyptians thought that, as long as the images and inscriptions existed, they made sure that the ritual they represented was permanently effective – according to their conception even up to today.

Although a single image was only able to depict one moment of ritual action, this one image was enough to represent the whole ritual according to the principle of *pars pro toto*. In any case, it was impossible to show the whole scenes of the ritual. We have to see the pictures of the single rites as iconic; they deny everything that could fix them on a special place or time. In this way they function as permanent magical reifications independent of any further human participation. The rules of this decoration programme are the same as those used in literature, because of

which E. Graefe says that the images have to be seen as a book rather than as an image; he calls them *großformatige Schriftzeichen* (Graefe 1993).

Theoretically, it should have been possible to act out the ritual without celebrating it – merely by representing the action in such pictures on the walls. But this very pragmatic and modern thinking, of course, does not fit with the ancient Egyptian conception of cult. Although they had these images the priests performed the ritual every day, and the reliefs were only something like safety nets, if something should go wrong during the cult. Moreover, the images always showed the ideal cult, the perfection that could never be reached in the real world. E. Blumenthal says that these images served to vault the imperfect earthly reality with the Egyptian conception of perfection (Blumenthal 2002, p. 57).

Visual objects were also used in the magic area. The typical magic image was a one-way image (e.g. wax figures, the so-called corn mummies or the images painted on the ground), which was destroyed after the ritual. They confirm the existence of a state and private cursing practice where Egyptian counterparts to the voodoo dolls from Haiti were used that were pierced by nails. This way of killing images is attested at least since the Second Intermediate Period (c. 1715–1551 BC). A very impressive example from the Roman Period is a female figurine pierced by thirteen nails (Fig. 3a). A magical papyrus that dates from the same time describes how such object were produced. Though it is written in Greek, the origin of this practice is indigenous Egyptian and dates back to the beginning of Egyptian civilization:

Take wax (or clay) from a potter's wheel and make two figures, a male and a female. Make the male in the form of Ares, fully armed, holding a sword in his left hand and threatening to plunge it into the right side of

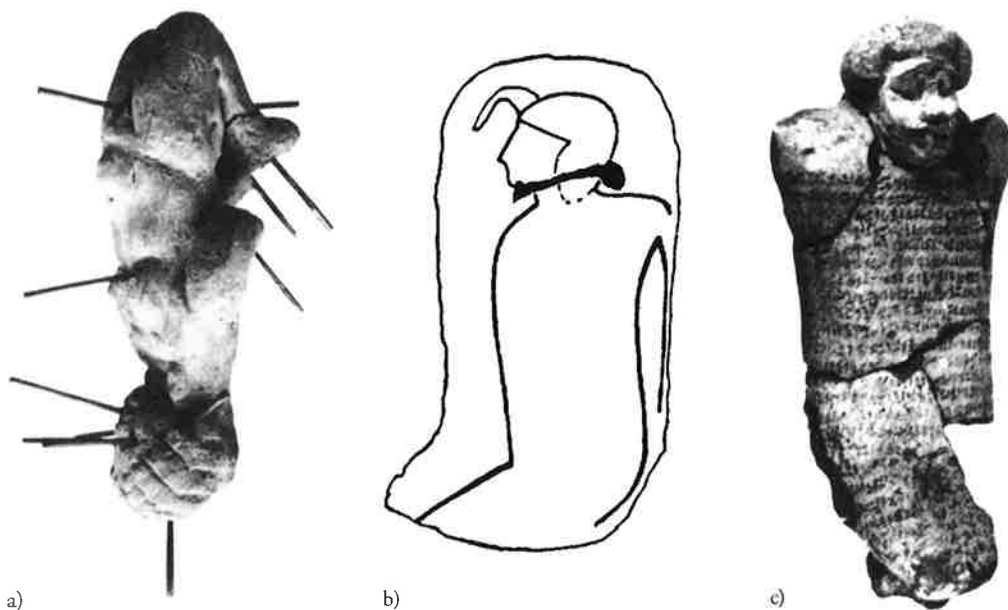


Fig. 3. a) Clay female figurine from Roman Period (Louvre inv. E 27145), after Ritner 1993: 111, Fig. 2; b) execution figurine from Brussels (inv. E 7442), after Ritner 1993: 138, Fig. 13a; c) execution figurine from Saite Fortress at Defennah, after Ritner 1993: 138, Fig. 13c.

her neck. And make her with her arms behind her back and down on her knees. And you are to attach the “personal effects” to her head or neck [...] And take thirteen copper needles and stick one in the brain while saying, “I am piercing your brain, NN”; and stick two in the ears and two in the eyes and one in the mouth and two in the midriff and one in the hands and two in the sexual organs and two in the soles, saying each time, “I am piercing such and such a member of her, NN, so that she may remember no one but me, NN, alone” (Preisendanz 1928, pp. 82 f.; translation after Ritner 1993, p. 113).

These often crudely produced figures represented personal enemies or figures of bound foreign rulers who could be identified by the names of the intended victims that were inscribed (Fig. 3b,c) (Ritner 1993, pp. 111 ff.). Such prisoner imagery was also used as protection from demons or disease, and in a fu-

nerary context they were said to avert hostile forces from the deceased. Most of these figures were made harmless by ritual torture or burial (Ritner 2001, pp. 234, 331), because of which only a few images of this kind have survived. But in illustrated magical scripts, which were used as a pattern for the production of magic images, we find these pictures in miniature. And of course we find such illustrations on the so-called magic knives made of ivory and other apotropaica, which were reused and not destroyed (Assmann 2004, p. 116; Bisi 1965, pp. 177 ff.). The magic wands or knives made from hippopotamus tusks, for example, were engraved with several animal spirits that offered protection from evil forces, especially from pregnant woman and children (Fig. 4).

Furthermore, we know about magic steles – especially the so-called Horus steles – which were intended to keep dangerous animals like snakes away (Kákósy 1980). A famous magic stele from the Kestner Museum in Hannover

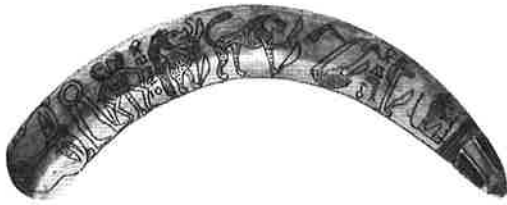


Fig. 4. Ivory magic knife (dynasty XII) from Metropolitan Museum of Art (30.8.218), after Ritner 2001: 323.

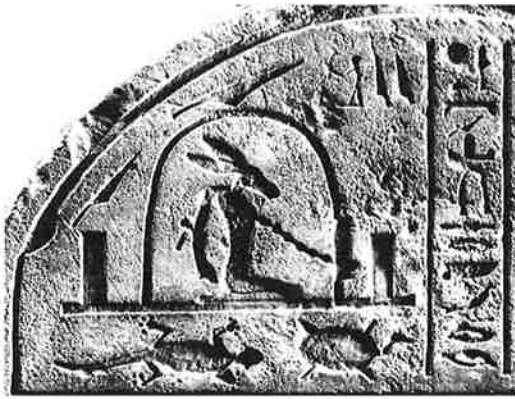


Fig. 5. Detail of a magic stele from the Kestner Museum at Hannover showing got Seth, after Derchain 1964: pl. 2.

(1935.200.445) shows in the upper part the god Seth with a donkey's head in prison kneeling, his arms bound behind his back (Fig. 5) (Derchain 1964).

The function of this image and the added text was to keep away the enemies of the sun-god and any evil that threatened people, especially in the nights and days of the full moon.

Some of these objects, the so-called healing statues, were covered with magic inscriptions and images, said to have curative or protective power. The magic statue of Djedhor from the Ptolemaic Period (c. 304–30 BC) that is now in the Museum of Cairo (JE 46341), for example, is completely covered with magical and mythological texts. Statues like this were usually set up in public places where anyone who needed help or protection could address

the statue as a mediator to the gods. The basin in the front was there for collecting the water which people poured over the statue so that it could take the magic power from the spells of the statue for prophylactic or therapeutic use (Tiradritti 2000, pp. 368 f.).

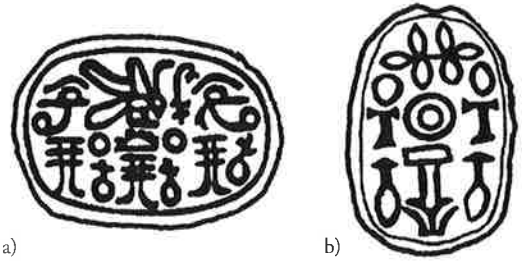


Fig. 6. a) Scarab (20 / 14 / 10 mm, brown, steatite) with hieroglyphic signs for the king of Upper and Lower Egypt, beauty, duration etc. (Hornung/Staehelin 1976: 208, no. 90); b) Scarab (22 / 14 / 5,5 mm, green, steatite) with hieroglyphic signs for protection, life, beauty etc (Hornung/Staehelin 1976: 208, no. 89).

Apart from this, in daily life the ancient Egyptians used different kinds of apotropaic amulets representing gods powerful symbols and hieroglyphs that were to protect them from any danger or to heal illnesses. For example, we have thousands of scarabs from ancient Egypt with images or signs on the base (Fig. 6).

The larger objects were sometimes combined with magic spells, but not necessarily. In other contexts a magician pronounced special ritual spells in combination with such images, but the figures and images were fundamentally independent of spoken words or inscribed spells. They could therefore be seen as endless magic images, what Assmann calls *Heilsbild* (Assmann 2004, p. 118).

The conception of *Einwohnung*

According to the speech act theory, images have “performative” status, which means they are able to create reality and not only to relate to reality. This reveals that the ancient Egyptians did *not* distinguish between the reproduction of a manifestation and the manifestation itself. Because of that, they thought that every image was animated. But though they did not consider the statues or images to be deities themselves, they could only serve as receptacle or earthly body for the gods and so be alive. The text called “Denkmal memphitischer Theologie” says that the creator Chnum “put the gods in their holy places, [...] founded their chapels, made their bodies as they wanted him to do. And so the gods came into (k) their body of wood, different minerals, different clay (and) different other things” (Junker 1940, p. 65).

Hence for the ancient Egyptians images and inscriptions had an enormous power and it was necessary to keep this power strictly controlled. Therefore dealing with the most powerful images – the cult images of the gods – was exactly regulated: starting with the act of producing what was said to be a magic-religious action. Cult statues were fashioned, protected from the view of uninitiated in the so-called gold-house of the temple. Here we still find information about the process of production on the walls (Chassinat & Daumas 1978, p. 128; Derchain 1990, pp. 233 f.; Quack 2000, p. 17).

But before a cult image was able to inhabit the Holy of Holies it was necessary to execute the so-called “opening of the mouth ritual” (Fig. 7), which was also performed for mummies during the burial ceremony. This ritual is surely the most important ancient Egyptian ritual because its function was the symbolic (re-)animation of a statue (or mummy) by opening its mouth magically while a cult functionary touched the lips with spe-

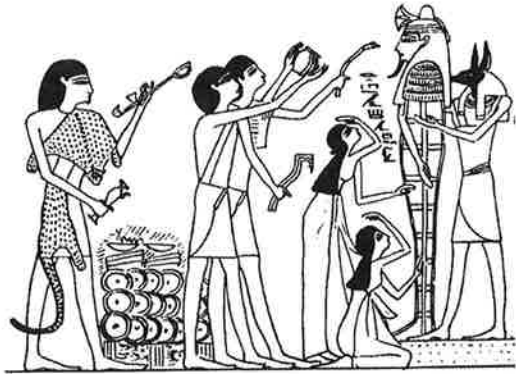


Fig. 7. Scene of the opening of the mouth ritual from Hunefers book of death, after Otto 1960: Fig. 7.

cial tools, so that it could breathe and speak (Otto 1960; Roth 1993; Eschweiler 1994, p. 303). Sometimes it was also accompanied by secondary rites to open the eyes. A. M. Roth mentions that the opening of the mouth ritual was “a metaphorical re-enactment of the clearing of a baby’s mouth at birth” (Roth 2001, p. 606). This ritual could be performed not only for single statues, but also for the whole temple. This way, the whole stone building was brought to life and could function as an animated body for the gods. The gods could from then on alight on every image, statue or temple they wanted and every “house” could be replaced by another.

A statue or image animated in this manner worked like a channel for communication between men and gods, but communication between private individuals and the gods was possible only in exceptional cases, for example, while the cult statues of the gods were being carried out on festival days. Only at such events was the cult statue displayed to humans, borne inside a small, portable shrine on a barque on the priest’s shoulders, and people were able to address the god and receive an oracle by the movements of the barques. Generally the statues were hidden from people’s view in the innermost sanctuary of the temple, to which only the temple’s high priests had ac-

cess and where rituals like the daily ritual for the statue were celebrated.

The temples of ancient Egypt are not comparable with Christian churches. They were not a place for the faithful to worship their gods or to hold masses for the people, but the houses of the gods. An Egyptian temple was the place where transitions between the world of human beings and the gods took place during the rituals, and only pharaoh – or his delegates – were allowed to communicate with the gods in a strictly regulated way.

According to the Egyptian conception of the New Kingdom, the gods were forces that could become immanent in every body or thing they chose – and dwell among men. The god became a *Deus relevatus* with a human face, standing opposite to the priest. Because of this Asclepius mentioned about the land at the Nile, that Egypt was the only land where the people managed by their religion to get their gods down to earth: “Aegyptus deorum in terras suae religionis merito sola deductio, sanctitatis et pietatis magistra” (Assmann 1984, p. 7). Beginning in the third millennium BC during the First Intermediate Period (c. 2134–2040 BC), the cult of images was extended to the so-called typical Egyptian *Bildertheologie* (S. Morenz). The cult image was the heart of every temple, kept in the holiest part of the building, the sanctuary.

For the union between god and image H. Junker and after him especially S. Morenz suggested the expression *Einwohnung*, which could be translated as “habitation” or “indwelling”. By using this term from theological language he wanted to express the very special connection between the god and his cult image: the god inhabited the statue during the ritual, but he was able to undo the connection whenever he wanted to (Morenz 1977, pp. 158 ff.). Because of this, D. Kurth says that the temple is “niemals bar seiner [the gods] Gegenwart und doch Ort seines ständigen Kommens” (Assmann 2003). D. van

der Plas calls this an LAT connection (“Living Apart Together”), emphasizing that the god could leave the earthly body any time and was also able to inhabit various bodies in different places at the same time. That is what he calls “cohabitation”.

For this process of inhabitation we have several examples, such as a morning song in the temple of Edfu from the Ptolemaic period:

He [the god Horus] comes down from heaven day by day to see his image on the great throne. He descends on his image and joins his cult-statue.

And from another inscription in the same temple we know:

As soon as Api [the winged sun disc] comes to the sky every day to see his image in his sanctuary, he descends on his statue, he joins with his relief image and his heart is pleased in his chapel (after Kurth 1994, p. 81).

In his book *Treffpunkt der Götter* D. Kurth calls the Egyptian temple a meeting point for the gods, the place where the godly “soul” (*ba*) meets the image (*sechem*) (Kurth 1994).

And I will not omit to mention that of course even the king himself could serve as an earthly body for the god; pharaoh was seen as the god’s living image (*twt anch*) on earth (e.g. Sethe 1906, p. 1676, 1–2; Tresson 1922, p. 7, l. 18).

To make sure that the gods would inhabit their earthly bodies, the Egyptians reproduced them as attractively as possible. According to A. P. Kozloff, the earliest cult image dates to the end of the fifth millennium BC (Kozloff 2001, p. 242). The 10.3 cm high and 6.7 cm wide painted oval terracotta human head with hollow eyes, nostrils, and mouth is the earliest image of a human ever (Tiradritti 2000, p. 24). The object was found in 1982 at Mer-



Fig. 8. a) Female statues from Brooklyn Museum, after Adams 1988: 25; b) terracotta human head from the Museum of Cairo, after Tiradritti 2000: 34; c) early cult statues of a falcon (presumably Horus), after Lorton 1999: 127, Fig. 2.

imda and is now in the Museum of Cairo (JE 97472) (Fig. 8a). One more expressive statue from the Predynastic Period (Negada IIa, *c.* 3200 BC) is a roughly 30 cm high semi-nude female terracotta figure from Brooklyn Museum (07.447.505) with birdlike head and upflung arms covered with a thin red wash (Fig. 8b) (Adams 1988, p. 25). The exact meaning of this statue is unclear, but A. P. Kozloff assumes that the slender female statuette represents an Egyptian sky goddess (Kozloff 2001, p. 242).

Most statues from this time were carved from hard stone like the black and granite statue flecked with pink from the Late Pre-historic Period or dynasty I (*c.* 3000 BC) (Fig. 8c) or were made from wood covered with a thin sheet of metal (Lorton 1999, pp. 128 ff.). If possible the craftsmen tried to use substances which were said to be appropriate for the heavenly bodies of the gods – especially gold and selected materials. The trouble is, because they used such expensive materials, few of these statues survived time – or rather the plundering of temples during the Persian occupations (525–404 BC, 343–332 BC) and the Christian era, when statues were melted and reused.

One of these few objects and, as a matter of fact, the most famous ancient Egyptian cult image is the statue of a falcon god from Hierakonpolis (Fig. 9a,b) (Quibell 1900, p. 11, pl. XLI ff.; Quibell & Green 1902, p. 27, and pl. LXXII; Rössler-Köhler 1978, pp. 117 ff.). Actually it is only the head of the falcon wearing a double crown. The gold and copper statue which was originally 55–60 cm high was found during an excavation in 1897/98

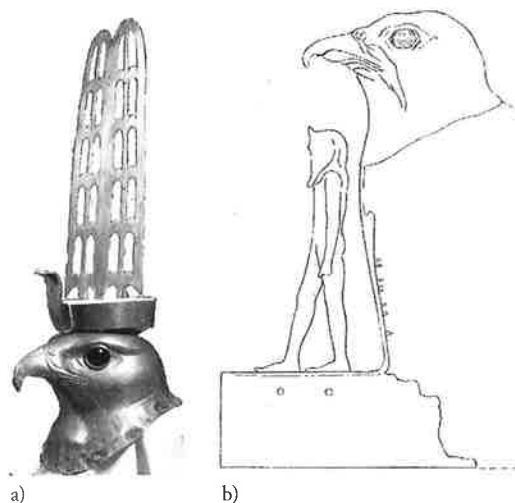


Fig. 9. a) Falcon god from Hierakonpolis, after Saleh/Sourouzian 1986: no. 66; b) draft of the falcon statue, after Quibell 1902: pl. LXXII.

by J. E. Quibell in a small hole covered with a plate of basalt in the middle of five chambers in the temple of Hierakonpolis. The falcon of Hierakonpolis was honourably buried there, as it was usual when cult images were replaced.

Though we have only a few of these objects, we know about cult images from pictures and inscriptions on the walls of tombs. They all give information about size, material and the manufacturing process of cult images. As I mentioned, they were normally made of gold and other expensive materials or of wood upgraded with various overlays or inlays of gemstone. They also use flint, which was very hard and said to be impregnable for demons. Usually these statues are very small, in contrast to the larger-than-life images of the gods on the temple walls (Guglielmi & Buroh 1997, p. 102; Ricke 1935, p. 117).

The potential danger of images

Contact with these different animated images was potentially dangerous. When one looks at the Egyptian ritual spells one gets the impression that it was permanently necessary to immobilize the godly beings to keep danger away from them. Only the correct behaviour during cult and the observance of special safety regulations could keep the cult functionary safe from the destructive power of the gods.

At first it was necessary for the priest to observe several cleaning rules and to perform the ritual in an absolutely correct way. The proper place and time for the ritual was as important as the respectable clothes, the accurate gestures, intonation and so on. But first of all, the cult functionary had to be authorized by the king himself to contact the cult image. Because of this the priest constantly repeated during the ritual that he was clean and legitimated by the king. Furthermore, he assured

the god that he did not want to do any harm to his cult image and the god who inhabited the statue.

In addition, the priest was safe if he was able to pinpoint the exact moment when the god inhabited his statue (*evocatio Dei*) or according to H. Bonnet when the god is dragged into his image through the ritual in a magical way (Bonnet 1925, p. 120). This was only possible when the statue was covered with cloth outside ritual time. Thus the priest was safe from his gaze when he opened the doors of the shrine. This attitude we find, for example, in the daily ritual (spell 11, ritual for Amun), where the priest says: "My face beware of the god and reversed!" So after ritually "opening the face of the god" the priest, prostrated in front of the statue, calmed the god and assured him that he would do no harm to him (spells 8 and 25, ritual for Amun): "I did not come to bring you away from your place" and "I am not here to do what should not be done" (Braun 2006, pp. 123, 114, 143 f.).

On the other hand it was also dangerous for the god to inhabit an earthly body, because as long as he joined his statue he was vulnerable. Like an entrapped animal the god could be anxious and react in an aggressive way against the priest if he was not sure about his intentions. For this reason, the priest says in one of the spells of the daily ritual that he is also safe from his enemies while he inhabits his earthly body (spell 14, ritual for Amun): "You will not fall through your enemies on this day" (Braun 2006, p. 126).

Considering this permanent danger during the ritual in front of the cult image, it was also compulsory to act out special appeasement rites to calm the deity, so that it would not get angry while the priest was standing next to his statue. The priests used especially music, dance (Sauneron 1968, p. 359; Schott 1950, pp. 76 f., no. 15; Darnell 1996, pp. 47 ff.; Dils 1993, pp. 107 f.; Sternberg-el-Hotabi 1992, pp. 101 ff.) and incense to calm the god



Fig. 10. Pharaoh incensing in front of god Amun (temple of Seti I, Abydos, sanctuary of Amun). Photo by the author

(Fig. 10). Furthermore they brought intoxicating drinks – in particular wine, which was said to help encourage the god’s heart (Junker 1917, pp. 113 ff.). But water too was able to calm the god and moreover the ancient Egyptians played a special ball game to amuse the god. Here the ball of clay symbolized the eye of Apophis – a dragon from the netherworld – that was batted with a club by pharaoh. The ritual served to appease the god and at the same time ritually destroyed his enemies (Hornung 1983, p. 489; Borghouts 1973, pp. 122 ff.; Keel 1974).

Because of this dangerous communication between men and gods J. Yoyotte compares the temple, as the place where the priests came into contact with the godly power, with a nuclear power station, where dangerous manipulations happen that could keep the world in balance, but could also be dangerous for the world. A. M. Bonhême agrees with this comparison. She says that the priests are like technicians, but only pharaoh knows and dominates the secret laws of the base (Bonhême & Forgeau 1989, p. 112). And J. Assmann adds that the safety precautions for the ancient Egyptians concerning the sanctuary

and the secrets of cult are comparable to the safety precautions of modern nuclear power stations; if the priests desecrate the sanctuary and reveal its secrets it is similar to nuclear disaster (Assmann 1996, p. 13).

In fact, dealing with godly images for the Egyptian priest was as dangerous as working with nuclear power today – both powers could serve as welfare for men, but at any time be life-threatening. Because of this, especially the animated cult images of ancient Egypt and their power had to be strictly guarded against any uninitiated person and the ancient Egyptians in general were used to dealing very carefully with every kind of image.

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