

RITA LUCARELLI

Ancient Egyptian Demonology



Apocalyptic Aperiodic
Èskathon Publishing

ÈSKATHON PUBLISHING
Meta-curatorial doomsday project
Eschatological Hermeneutics Of Doom Revelations

APOCALYPTIC APERIODIC SERIE

Published by: RMEDL | Èskathon Publishing

Èskathon Publishing | Apocalyptic Aperiodic serie | Philosophical Working Papers:
An anthology of philosophical essays, articles and pamphlet in literary, non-literary and extra literary types,
regarding apocalyptical, hermeneutic, escathologic and hermetic topics.

Concept Design, Edition Design, Curating: Radical Matters - Editions / Label | Sandro Gronchi

Date of publication: April 2013 | Catalogue number: RMEPAAS021
Online platforms: www.radicalmatters.com | www.radicalmatters.com/eskathonpublishing
Licensed by Creative Commons : BY-NC-Nd-3.0

Rita Lucarelli
Ancient Egyptian Demonology

An Introduction

The question of demons in ancient Egypt is still an unsolved matter within the studies of the ancient Egyptian religion.¹ To start with, there is an objective difficulty to distinguish demons from gods; in ancient Egyptian there are only terms referring to the gods in general (nTr.w) and to the beatified spirits or roaring ghosts of the dead persons (Akh.w). Beside the nTr.w and the Akh.w, there are hundreds of epithets indicating a series of supernatural creatures populating the netherworld and occurring also in the magical spells of daily life, but whose ontological status remains unclear, in between the divine and the demonic. However, among these epithets there are collective names indicating gangs of helpers and emissaries of the gods that seem to be characterized clearly as demons, such as the wpwty.w, “messengers”, the xAty.w, “slaughterers” and the SmAy.w, “wanderers”. However, can we speak about “demons” and “demonology” at all when dealing with pre-Christian polytheistic religions? Even if the English term “demon” comes from the Greek daimon, it does not exactly cover the semantic spectrum of the Greek equivalent, which indicates an “intermediate being” among gods and humankind, as in Plato’s Symposium, or in general a divine supernatural power as when used in the plural form daimones in Homer. Later on, with the Neo-Platonism and Xenocrates, the idea of daimon as a lesser spiritual being of evil nature was developed, and such a pejorative semantic value is still present in the English word “demon”, especially in relation to the evil court of Satan in Hell. Therefore, we must keep in mind that speaking about “demonology” is just a scholarly convention when referring to supernatural creatures or minor deities of pre-Christian religions, whose nature and function is more complex and multi-faceted. If the ontological status of demons is so shadowy, the function they play towards humankind and the place where they appear or act on earth and in the netherworld is instead easier to individuate. On this basis, I distinguish two main categories of demons: guardians and wanderers. Guardian demons are tied to a specific place, either in the netherworld or on earth, and protect their locality from intrusion and pollution. Wandering demons travel between this and the other world acting either as emissaries for deities or on their own accord. They can bring diseases, nightly terrors, and misfortune. We can also individuate at least other seven sub-categories of demonic beings in order to refine our basic typology:

Demons of the netherworld.

The netherworld is the abode par excellence of demons. Therefore this category groups together various sorts of supernatural beings, from the gatekeepers and other inhabitants of the Realm of the Dead to the gangs of messengers sent by the gods on earth. These demons appear mainly in mortuary texts and illustrations describing the afterlife or providing a magical help for the deceased. Mortuary texts are broadly attested in ancient Egypt: the Book of the Dead and the Guides of the Netherworld are the most famous examples.

Guardian-demons.

In many civilizations, doorways and sacred places on earth and in the netherworld are traditionally guarded by demonic figures. In ancient Egypt demonic gatekeepers are encountered very frequently in the texts describing the Realm of the Dead, so that this can be considered as a kind of sub-category of the aforementioned group. However, the particularity of the guardians is that they can play the additional role of benevolent genii protecting temples on earth and are therefore .

Illness-demons.

The demonization of illnesses is common in many civilizations. It generates from the search for a cause or agent in order to explain and justify the sudden presence of certain diseases and physical suffering. Magical spells against illness-demons and exorcism rites to expel demonized diseases from the body are considered powerful remedies, whose influence is considered complementary to the medical knowledge. As illness demons are evil, there were numerous magico-medical spells to avert them. It seems that those illnesses not presenting visible physical symptoms, such as the headache and the epilepsy, were more commonly demonized than wounds provoked by the poisonous bites of insects such as scorpions and snakes, to which however other series of incantations were devoted.

Gangs of demons controlled or sent by gods.

This category is well represented in the magical and ritual temple texts, where demonic gangs with collective names such as the already mentioned wpwty.w, “the messengers,” xAty.w, “the slaughterers,” SmAy.w, “the wanderers,” occur as divine agents of punishment, and their popularity seems to increase with time. In the Late and Ptolemaic periods the apotropaic spells against these gangs are very often attested in temple texts, where some of these demonic legions are even represented together with the god or goddess who masters them, such as in the case of the so-called “Seven Arrows” controlled by the sphinx god Tutu or the lion-headed goddess Bastet.

Astral demons, demons of time, winds.

Astral bodies can be demonized or divinized because of the influence they were believed to have on humankind. In Egypt, in particular, planets, stars and other celestial bodies are represented in the so-called “astronomical ceilings” of the temples and occasionally also in funerary compositions decorating the tomb- walls. The decan-stars, for example, are often personified in the Ptolemaic and later texts as malevolent demons; moreover, the sky was considered to be the abode of supernatural creatures playing the role of guardians of those regions and whose appearance resembles that of demons of the netherworld, as those

represented in the vignette of Spell 149 of the Book of the Dead.² Beside the astral bodies, there were also atmospheric phenomena that were demonized in Egypt, first of all the winds: wind-demons occur in the ritual texts of the Ptolemaic Period in Egypt and the god Amun can be represented with four heads symbolizing the four winds of the cardinal points, which he controls. However, the personification of the winds stands ambiguously between the divine and the demonic and it is not really clear from the sources whether these are to be considered minor gods (the so-called weather gods so popular in myths of many religions) or rather demons as they are instead clearly seen in Mesopotamian religion.³ Finally, among demons related to astral phenomena we may include the so-called “demons of time”, symbolizing some challenging moments of the day or even some unlucky or lucky days in the calendar, as the epagomena, the last five days of the Egyptian calendar, which were considered a liminal time when demonic dangerous forces may attack humankind easier. We should also mention what we may call a midday-demon, who used to appear at noon and was later identified in the Greek folklore with Pan.⁴

Demonized animals.

This category does not refer to demons themselves but rather to their theriomorphic manifestations. In Egypt also the gods can have composite or animal appearance, but there are a few animals, especially wild beasts and reptiles like serpents and crocodiles, which are more employed in the iconography of demons than in that of the gods. Moreover, demonic animals are often depicted as being mastered or annihilated by major demons or apotropaic gods, like in the representations of Horus the Child on the magical Horus stelas.

Individualized demons and mythological monsters.

Apart from the above-mentioned categories of demonic gangs, a few figures of individualized demons stand on their own, such as Amemet, the devourer of the dead occurring in the vignette of Spell 125 of the Book of the Dead. Moreover, under this category we shall also include those hybrid and monstrous creatures, such as the giant dragons and serpents acting as arch-enemies of creation, which cannot be considered properly as demons although they share with the latter many iconographical and functional aspects, such as the giant snake Apopis.

Female demons.

Compared to other pre-Christian Near Eastern civilizations, the ancient Egyptian sources offer poorer evidence on female demons. However, in general many illness-inflicting demons or demonized illnesses were female, and female demons were considered mostly evil or anyway easily irritable, following the character of angry goddesses with apotropaic function such as the lion-headed Sakhmet.

In all the demons' categories described above, the ethical issue of good versus evil or amoral demons is central since in the ancient Egyptian religion, in contrast to Christianity, we do not recognize an ethical dichotomy opposing demons to angels. Demons, even more than gods, can be either benevolent or malevolent towards humankind and can behave amorally or even immorally to each other. Nevertheless, we can individuate a few categories of constantly evil demons, such as the illness demons and many of the wanderers occurring in

apotropaic spells. Apart from their function towards humankind and their more or less closeness to the good or evil sphere of behavior, demons can be defined also according to their appearance or modalities of manifestation. Scholars of ancient religion mainly use the terms *Mischenwesen* or *Zwischenwesen* in order to indicate the specific type of manifestation of demons. The first term, *Mischenwesen*, refers mainly to the physical appearance and indicates “mixed beings” with composite, hybrid bodies, while the term *Zwischenwesen*, “beings in between” recalls the spiritual dimension of creatures living in between earth and sky and not manifesting to humankind through a body. Within the context of ancient Egyptian demons, we may say that the *Mischenwesen* are those hybrid beings populating the netherworld and depicted in mortuary papyri, on coffins and on other mortuary objects, such as the guardian-demons, while the *Zwischenwesen* are those wandering spirits occurring mostly in spells of daily magic and hardly depicted in the sources. As mentioned above, demons of the netherworld and guardians and door watchers of the regions of the Realm of the Dead in particular have a more detailed iconography compared to other categories of demons. This is because the deceased has to be able to recognize them and to know their name in order to get his way through the netherworld and reach the final assimilation to the gods. The hybrid appearance of the demons of the netherworld is recurrent in all the papyri and the other sources where they are depicted; it seems to me that, similar to other ancient civilizations (Mesopotamia, Greece), in ancient Egypt the theriomorphic traits of the supernatural beings recall the demons’ wildest and most fearful aspects, their “otherness” in comparison to the anthropomorphic forms of appearance which denote their humanization and consequently their admittance into the civilized world. The animals which occur most often in the body of demons are reptiles, felines and canines, but also donkeys, baboons, hippos, bulls, birds, falcons and vultures can be part of a demonic or divine body. As a matter of fact, in ancient Egypt animals have always been connected to the gods’ characterization and inner identity. The animal and hybrid forms of the gods can resemble or even be the same as those of the demons, especially when dealing with apotropaic deities who have to fight against malevolent forces. Therefore, in order to study the world of ancient Egyptian demons and to isolate them from the pantheon of the official gods, it is necessary to have a close look at the sources and to focus on each individual context where the demons appear: temple rituals, spells of daily magic, apotropaic incantations or funerary spells for the dead present different and variegated evidence about the whereabouts of the supernatural beings that we call “demons.”



Guardian demons of the Book of the Dead of Anhai (21st Dynasty, Thebes).
Photo courtesy of British Museum, London.



Notes

1. *This article is a résumé of the main issues encountered during my study on demons in ancient Egypt and that I have discussed more extensively in the following papers: “Demonology during the Late Pharaonic and Greco-Roman Periods in Egypt”, JANES (Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions 11 (2011), 109-125. “Demons (benevolent and malevolent)”, UCLA Encyclopedia of Egyptology 2010. Department of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures. UC Los Angeles. <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/1r72q9vv> | “The guardian demons of the Book of the Dead”. British Museum Studies in Ancient Egypt and Sudan 15, 2010. http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/online_journals/bmsaes/issue_15/lucarelli.aspx | See these articles also for the bibliographical references to the issues mentioned in the present paper, which has been first published in: SSEA (Society for the Study of Egyptian Antiquities) Newsletter, Winter 2011-2012, Toronto: <http://www.thessea.org/newsletter.php>*
2. *A monograph on Spell 149 (which is part of my research on demons) is forthcoming.*
3. *See for instance the origin and nature of the Mesopotamian demon Pazuzu, king of the winds.*
4. *See L. Kákosy, “Daemon meridianus”, Studia Aegyptiaca II, 1976, 197-198.*

About the Author

Rita Lucarelli studied at the University of Naples "L'Orientale," Italy, where she took her MA degree in Classical Languages and Egyptology. She holds her Ph.D. from Leiden University, The Netherlands (2005) and her Ph.D. thesis was published in 2006 as *The Book of the Dead of Gatseshen. Ancient Egyptian Funerary Religion in the 10th Century BC*. Currently she works as Research Scholar at the Book of the Dead Project of the University of Bonn, Germany. Her primary research interests are the magical and funerary compositions of the Pharaonic and Greco-Roman Egypt, in particular those of the so-called "Book of the Dead" papyri whose contents aimed at the protection of the dead during his journey in the netherworld. She is also currently preparing a monograph on demonology in ancient Egypt, where she is attempting to disclose and clarify the meaning and function of that category of intermediate beings conventionally called "demons".

Èskathon Publishing | Apocalyptic Aperiodic serie
Rita Lucarelli - Ancient Egyptian Demonology: An Introduction.

Licensed by Creative Commons : BY-NC-Nd-3.0 | 2013 | All the contents are the property of their respective owners.
This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License:
To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0>



