



ESSEX EGYPTOLOGY GROUP - REVIEW

December 2019 Meeting

by Margaret Patterson

"Perceptions of Seth" - Dr Ian Taylor

At the beginning of December Dr Ian Taylor, one of our members, talked to us about the subject of his PhD:

Seth (<https://etheses.bham.ac.uk/id/eprint/7714/1/Taylor17PhD.pdf>). He began by talking about the modern image of Seth*, before turning to the evidence for how the Ancient Egyptians thought about this god. The common modern perception of Seth is as the dangerous enfant terrible of the Ancient Egyptian pantheon who brought death to the gods by murdering Osiris and came into conflict with Horus by usurping the throne. This comes to us by way of Plutarch, whose "Isis and Osiris" was the only version of the myth known before the translation of hieroglyphs.

*As an aside Taylor mentioned here that while the name of Seth is different in different places and at different times he was going to stick to using "Seth" throughout his presentation.

In Plutarch's text Seth along with his 72 minions murders Osiris by tricking him into a box. The box is then thrown into the river where it floats out into the sea and eventually comes to rest at Byblos. It gets caught in timber which is subsequently used as building material by the king of Byblos. Isis manages to track down the box and body of Osiris which she brings back to Egypt. She tries to hide it from Seth but isn't successful and he rips it into pieces which he scatters throughout Egypt. Isis gathers up all the parts save one and reconstructs Osiris, replacing the missing penis either with one she makes herself or with one that another god makes for her. She conceives a son (Horus) by Osiris, posthumously, who grows up to take the throne and avenge his father's death.

Having told us the Plutarch version of this myth Taylor pointed out all the ways that it's an example of Greek thought rather than Ancient Egyptian thought - unsurprisingly as it was written in the 2nd Century CE long after Pharaonic Egypt had ended. Most notably in the text the names of the gods have been replaced with their Greek "equivalents". So Seth is called Typhon, who is a monstrous creature. Thoth is referred to as Hermes, and Amun as Zeus. Several Greek tropes are present in the text - for example the use of trickery in the murder, Isis cutting her hair in mourning and Thoth using Seth's sinews to make a lyre. There are also some wholly non-Egyptian parts - like the addition of satyrs, and the whole episode in Byblos which appears to be there to pad out the story. The text presents the gods as demi-gods, and at the end all of them except Seth become true gods. Seth remains a demi-god and a demon.

Plutarch's presentation of Seth has had a great influence on modern perceptions of Seth. Taylor talked us through a whole list of modern media representations of Seth, most of which are of questionable quality (although the cartoon strips and architecture

examples were pretty good). Novels included some written by Dennis Wheatley, Robert E. Howard, Roger Zelazny and Andy McDermott. There are a couple of childrens cartoons featuring Seth - Mummies Alive and Tutenstein. The cartoon strips are online so I'll link to a Seth related strip from each -

By the Gods (<https://www.deviantart.com/darrenpepper/art/By-The-Gods-12-426857345>)

Stick Gods (<https://inonibird.tumblr.com/post/103650393880/stick-gods-how-to-summon-a-cat-goddess-pt-2>).

In film and TV Seth has shown up in a Doctor Who episode (The Pyramids of Mars), The Curse of King Tut's Tomb, Sands of Oblivion, The Gods of Egypt and various versions of The Mummy films. Taylor's last example was a modern relief of Ancient Egyptian gods carved on a Homebase store on Warwick Road, London - now sadly demolished. Most of the gods in this relief were carrying ankhs as you might expect, but Seth had a powerdrill! While writing this article I found a blog post with pictures of it from just before it was demolished, which are worth a look: <https://herbertwright.wordpress.com/2014/07/12/egyptian-deities-for-extermination-in-kensington/>

So the modern idea of Seth owes almost everything to Plutarch, but fortunately the decipherment of hieroglyphs has led to a broader and more complete picture of what the Ancient Egyptians thought about Seth. For the bulk of his talk Taylor talked us through the representation of Seth in Ancient Egypt in (mostly) chronological order looking first at the funerary context, at the geographical range, at temples and finally at more personal contexts. Seth is one of the most ancient of the Egyptian gods - the oldest two are Neith and Min, and then the next two are Horus and Seth. Taylor showed us a proto-Seth animal totem that dates to the Naqada II period (c. 3500-3200 BCE). This was found in Grave 721 at Naqada, and was originally identified as a hippo model but viewed from side on it's more clearly a Seth animal. There are also depictions of the Seth animal on the Scorpion Macehead (dating to just before the unification of Egypt). There are two Seth animals which look like they are totems - he speculates that they represent the eastern and western deserts.

Moving forward in time there is also evidence of Seth from the 2nd Dynasty period - during this time he associated with Nubt in Upper Egypt. One of the kings of this dynasty called Peribsen wrote his name in a serekh topped with the Seth animal (rather than the more usual Horus). And then one of his successors (Khasekhemwy) had both Horus and Seth on top of his serekh - and one of his names means "The Two Lords are at Peace". This might indicate some sort of conflict, and be the historical kernel round which the later myth is written.

The first written evidence of Seth comes in the Pyramid Texts. These are a collection of texts written inside the pyramids of several Pharaohs and Queens in the late Old Kingdom period. No two pyramids have the same set of texts, and they show evidence of evolution over the 200 years that they were used from the time of Unas (last king of the 5th Dynasty) onward. There are several categories of texts, and also three mythical strands: political union of Egypt, sun and star cults, and the myth of Osiris. Seth is involved in all three of these, and his representation in the texts is not internally consistent. Sometimes he is a positive force and sometimes a negative one (with variation in the balance between the two representations in different pyramids).

The Osiris myth is a key part of the Pyramid Texts yet at that point Osiris is a recent god. The first written representation of Osiris is in the funeral text of Niuserre (the sixth king of the 5th Dynasty) and the first image is in the temple of Djedkare (8th king of the

5th Dynasty and the predecessor of Unas). In the Pyramid Texts Osiris is associated with the deceased king, and the texts dealing with him show a shift in the relationship between Horus and Seth. In Predynastic times Seth and Horus are equals who work together. In the Osirian Pyramid Texts Seth and Horus are in conflict. Seth is bad, but he is the necessary villain - he starts the cycle of uninterrupted hereditary kingship: the king is dead, long live the king! Horus, however, is good - he is the rightful heir, and the principle of hereditary kingship. The murder of Osiris is pivotal to the myth, but it's not directly stated in the Pyramid Texts, only inferred. How it is referred to evolves over time: in Unas's pyramid there is no direct reference, in Teti's pyramid Osiris drowns and in Pepi I's pyramid Seth attacks Osiris. The punishment of Seth also evolves over the same time period, with the number and severity of punishments growing as the cult of Osiris grows. The writing of Seth's name also evolves across the period. In the later two pyramids Seth's name is always written phonetically without a determinative, but in Unas's pyramid the Seth animal is sometimes seen in the texts. There are 35 Seth animals across the texts, and no two are the same - which is an oddity that Taylor was to come back to later in his talk. They are sometimes used as a determinative for the name of Seth and sometimes as a determinative for the word for storm.

The other, older relationship between Seth and Horus is also represented in other parts of the Pyramid Texts. In these utterances the two gods are shown as brothers and equals. Another (older) written representation of this sort is found in the tomb of Merysankh III (who lived in the 4th Dynasty) - one of her epithets is "she who perceives Horus and Seth". Essentially the two gods are the two faces of kingship, with Seth representing the warlike part.



Photo by John Patterson of a (heavily restored) statue of Seth and Horus (not shown) crowning Ramesses III now in the Cairo Museum

The Coffin Texts evolved from the Pyramid Texts, and were written on Middle Kingdom coffins. As with the Pyramid Texts not all sets of Coffin Texts contain every text. About

179 mention Seth, but he doesn't show up in every set of Coffin Texts. There isn't any geographical component to this variation - Seth shows up throughout most of the Nile Valley. His name is written both phonetically and as the Seth animal. Taylor showed us two examples of a writing of Seth's name where the Seth animal had been "killed" with a knife or mutilated - he speculated that this might be the personal preference of the scribe. Perhaps the commissioner of the coffin wanted those texts but the scribe didn't like Seth.

The perception of Seth has changed between the Pyramid Texts and the Coffin Texts and this is shown a change of epithets and of roles. Seth gains the epithets of "the Outcast" and "the Ombite". He has several new roles: defender of Ra, god of the desert, god of foreign lands and god of the northern sky.

Just before our break for coffee and cake Taylor turned his attention briefly to the sites associated with Seth over time. A lot of these are on the entry to the desert, as is appropriate for the god of the desert. In the Ptolemaic Period there are four major cult sites of Seth. These are listed in Edfu and Dendera temples, despite the otherwise growing antipathy to Seth at this time. Three of these sites are in the Nile Valley (N-shene-n-setekh, Unu and Spermeru) and the fourth is "the Oases" which may mean Dakhla Oasis.

After the break Taylor moved on to tell us about temple depictions of Seth. In Old Kingdom temples, unlike Old Kingdom tombs, Seth is readily depicted. He's usually shown as a man with the head of the Seth animal (which Taylor referred to as the bimorphic form of Seth), carrying a Was sceptre. Taylor showed us several examples spanning the range from a 3rd Dynasty temple of Djoser to a temple of Pepi II at the end of the 6th Dynasty.

Taylor began his examples of Middle Kingdom and Second Intermediate Period temple depictions of Seth by telling us that they were more interesting than the Old Kingdom ones. He showed us several examples, most of which were door lintels, and there were a couple of common motifs. The first of these was a paired scene with two images of the king back to back. In front of one king was Seth as an animal on a standard and in front of the other king was Horus as a hawk. They offer the king life and dominion. The other motif (on a door lintel but also on several statues of Senwosret I at Lisht) was Seth and Horus performing the sema-tawy - this is a symbol of the unification of the two lands where two gods tie together the plants of Upper and Lower Egypt. The gods are in their bimorphic forms, and Seth is tying the sedge of Upper Egypt. In summary in this period temple depictions of Seth and Horus are not in conflict (a la Plutarch) but are working in concert as equals.

The first example from the New Kingdom is very like those of the Middle Kingdom - a lintel of Amenhotep I at Thebes with the same animal on a standard motif as those earlier door lintels - and this motif also returns on a door lintel of Merenptah (19th Dynasty successor to Ramesses II) at Memphis. Seth continues to act in concert with Horus in this motif, and in other reliefs showing the two gods purifying or crowning the Pharaoh. Another motif that is present in the New Kingdom is Seth as one of the eight gods of the Ennead alongside Nephthys, either as humans or mummiform figures. And Taylor also showed us examples of a Pharaoh offering to Seth (or Seth and Nephthys). There is also a unique relief that shows Seth teaching Thutmose III archery, at Karnak temple.

In the 20th Dynasty these sorts of motifs continue to be found. At Medinet Habu there are scenes where Seth is purifying the Pharaoh with Horus and where he is being offered wine or incense. There is also a scene of Seth killing Apep - the earliest known representation of this motif. Moving into the Third Intermediate Period and Late Period there are still representations of Seth in these types of motifs - for instance at Karnak Seth and Horus are shown crowning Herihor. But at the Dahkla Oasis there appears to be a shift some time in the 25th Dynasty. There is a relief there that shows signs of having been re-carved during that period to remove the Seth animal. Taylor stressed that the proscription appears to be against the Seth animal, not Seth himself - the god is still in the relief, it's just the animal that is removed. It's not clear what the reason for this removal is.

In the Graeco-Roman period the representations of Seth change. At Dendera in a relief on the roof Seth is shown being killed. At Philae there is a depiction of a bound Seth held by Thoth and Horus, and being killed. But the attitude to Seth is not straightforwardly a wish to kill him - it's more ambiguous and he is still seen as necessary. For instance at Edfu there are depictions of Seth killing Apep, and at the Dahkla Oasis in the Roman Period there is an example of the motif of a mummiform Seth and Nephthys. The Oases in particular still revered Seth (not surprising as he was god of the desert in which these people lived), and there is a relief at Kharga Oasis which shows some interesting signs of re-carving. It is in a temple built during the reign of Darius, and the decoration is altered in the Ptolemaic Period. As it stands now it is a depiction of a large winged Seth killing Apep. Taylor ran through the evidence that shows this scene was extensively re-carved, and said that he thinks it originally depicted the god Amun-Nakht who was often used as a replacement for Seth in this type of scene. But as Seth was still revered in the Oases they did not approve of this replacement (mandated by the central authority) and so re-carved it to be a much bigger and more impressive Seth.

Taylor now turned to evidence of more personal forms of adoration of Seth. The first of these is personal names that reference Seth - like Seti which means "man of Seth". The numbers of these sorts of names varies over Egyptian history - in the Middle Kingdom there were only 8 recorded, in the New Kingdom we know of 65. This was the peak (although the Middle Kingdom number may be low because there are fewer names we know in total from the period). After this as Seth became less favoured the number of names drops with 4 known from the Third Intermediate Period and only 1 from the Late Period (a person who lived in one of the Oases).

Seth is also depicted on more small scale and domestic objects than those we had seen so far in the talk. Taylor showed us examples of Middle Kingdom and New Kingdom jewellery (including a pectoral of Senwosret II or Senwosret III with a paired Seth and Horus on it). Amulets of Seth have been found dating to the New Kingdom and Late Period, also domestic statuettes and stelae. The last example of this type of item was a bit less domestic but still personal - there is a piece of clothing called a king's jacket which looks like the torso of the king is wrapped in protective wings. Usually these are shown with hawk heads (for Horus) at the front near the armpits of the king. But Taylor showed us two examples of Thutmose III and Ramesses II wearing a king's jacket with Seth animal heads.

As well as personal adoration Taylor showed us examples of personal desecration - acts of disrespect towards Seth. For instance normally a scribe would recharge his pen

before writing a god's name to avoid any possibility of the ink running out during the name. But Taylor showed us some examples of where a scribe hadn't bothered when writing Seth's name, and in fact deliberately lets the ink fade out to almost nothing during the name. Other such acts were to "kill" the Seth animal when writing it with a knife drawn cutting it or a mark across it, or "killing" the phonetic writing of Seth's name by adding a knife between the hieroglyphs.

The Seth animal itself is quite curious. Throughout the rest of the talk Taylor had been pointing out how even within a text or relief no two Seth animals were the same. In general, Egyptian art of the flora and fauna of their world is quite specific - it's not just "a hawk" it's a specific species, not just "a vulture" but a particular type, etc. But while there are some commonalities between different representations of the Seth animal there's a lot of variation, and none of them look like a real animal (or even a composite).

Taylor demonstrated these with a diagram of the animal before showing us some more examples from reliefs. The body is canine in form but may be lean, medium or stocky (or even fat!). The neck shows variations in angle and length, and he may or may not be wearing a collar. The muzzle shows a lot of variation in the angle, the brow ridge over the eyes and the nose. Taylor said he had worked out that there are around 120 possible variations of the whole face. The ears are erect with square cut tops, but they vary widely in length, angle and width - and they may be plain or decorated. The tail is erect, but the angle and length vary, it may be curved or straight and there is a lot of variation in how it joins to the body. The tail end also shows a lot of variation, including a variant that makes it look like an arrow stuck into Seth's bottom! So there's a loose set of rules for what a Seth animal looks like, but these are open to interpretation. Taylor's conclusion is that it is a construct, not a real animal. In the Q&A session afterwards he speculated about the head looking like a bit like a cow skull (such as one might see bleached white in the desert) "reconstructed" with skin but not the musculature of the real animal, and Hannah Pethen pointed out the similarity with how we reconstruct dinosaurs in the modern day.

In the Ptolemaic Period the earlier Seth animal is gone, and instead the animal representation of Seth is a canine creature with an ass's head or just an ass. In either form it may be shown stabbed in order to "kill" it.

Taylor wrapped up his talk with some general conclusions about the position of Seth in Ancient Egyptian thought. Contrary to Plutarch's depiction for most of Pharaonic Egypt he is an accepted part of the pantheon, often acting in concert with Horus as an equal. He can't be "bad" because if so he wouldn't be depicted in motifs such as the sema-tawy. Even in Ptolemaic times he's necessary - to kill Apep but also to murder Osiris as without that murder the myth does not work.

And as a postscript Taylor pointed out one other legacy of Seth that came to modern culture without Plutarch's intervention. The imagery of Seth killing Apep morphs during Roman times into a winged (human) Seth killing a worm (Apep), and this is co-opted by the Christian church as imagery for St George (who is, after all, a Middle Eastern saint). So in a sense Seth is St. George: "Cry God for Harry, England and St. Seth!".

This talk was a really interesting look at the god behind the myth and at how some of the things we think we "know" about Ancient Egyptian theology are filtered through a later culture's ideas about how religion should work.