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THOTH OF PNUBS

تحوت بنوبس

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THOTH OF PNUBS

تحوت بنوبس

Martina Minas-Nerpel

Thot von Pnubs
Thot de Pnoubis

In Nubia, Thoth was venerated as, among other manifestations, Thoth of Pnubs. He is only attested in Lower Nubia, either in temple reliefs and inscriptions, or in graffiti. In the Ptolemaic and Roman Periods, a rather large temple was built at el-Dakka for Thoth of Pnubs, Lord of Pselchis (el-Dakka). There he is depicted in two forms, as a seated baboon under the nbs-tree, and anthropomorphically, with the four-feathered crown of Onuris, whose characteristics he assumed. Thoth of Pnubs developed into a composite god, combining features of Thoth of Hermopolis, Onuris, and Shu, fulfilling the same role as Shu in the myth of the Return of the Distant Goddess.

في النوبة، كان يُعبد تحوت في عدة أشكال وتجليات، من بينها "تحوت بنوبس". ولا يُعرف هذا التجلي إلا في النوبة السفلى فقط، سواء من خلال النقوش والمناظر داخل المعابد، أو من خلال كتابات الجرافيتي. وخلال العصرين البطلمي والروماني، شُيّد معبد كبير نسبيًا في منطقة الدكة مكرّس لـ "تحوت بنوبس، سيد سلكيس (الدكة)". وقد صُوّر هناك في هيتين: كقرد جالس تحت شجرة النيس، أو بشكل إنساني، مرتديًا تاج أونوريس ذي الريش الأربع، وهو الإله الذي استعار تحوت بعضًا من خصائصه. تطوّر تحوت بنوبس ليُصبح إلهًا مركّبًا، يجمع بين صفات تحوت الهيرموبوليتي، وأونوريس، وشو، مؤديًا الدور نفسه الذي أدّاه شو في أسطورة عودة الإلهة البعيدة.

Thoth of Pnubs is only attested in Lower Nubia, either in graffiti or temple inscriptions (*LGG VII*: 647b–648a). The temple at [el-Dakka](#) (fig. 1), built and decorated in the Ptolemaic and Roman Periods, was dedicated to Thoth of Pnubs, Lord of Pselchis (el-Dakka), while the gods of Philae played a major part in the decoration. Griffith (1937: 17) suggested that it was appropriate for a temple of Thoth to have been established at el-Dakka, “a frontier post for imports and a great market,” for two reasons—namely, Thoth’s connection with trade and business and his pivotal role in the myth of the Return of the Distant Goddess (Junker 1911; Inconnu-Bocquillon 2001; Preys 2006).

Pnubs is identified for the most part with the settlement of Dukki Gel, one kilometer north of Kerma at the southern end of the Third Cataract (Bonnet 2019; Valbelle and Bonnet 2019; Rickert 2015: 230–231 §11), contra the opinion that Pnubs might have been el-Dakka (e.g., Lacovara 2010). Boylan (1922: 169–172) connected Pnubs with Hierasykaminos, located approximately ten kilometers from Pselchis, but he also referred to a Pnubs in Upper Nubia, from which Thoth of Pnubs derived his title.

Thoth’s association with Pnubs is secondary (Inconnu-Bocquillon 1988), his primary attribution being the *nbs*-tree or “Christ’s thorn” (Pancin 2023: 1175; Rickert 2015: 196 §4b; Wilson 1997: 505–506: *Zizyphus spina-christi*; contra Gohary [1998: 47], who



Figure 1. The temple of el-Dakka in 1838; watercolor by David Roberts.

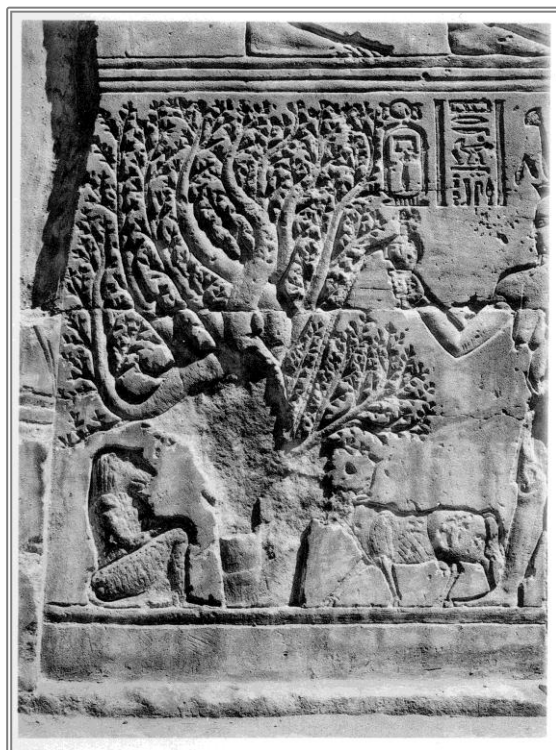


Figure 2. Thoth of Pnubs, at lower left, as a seated baboon under the *nbs*-tree in the Roman sanctuary of el-Dakka Temple.

identifies it with the sycamore-fig tree). Thoth of Pnubs is depicted as a seated baboon under this tree (fig. 2) in the Roman sanctuary of el-Dakka Temple, where he receives a procession of Nile gods (*PM VII* 49, base of [61]; Roeder 1913: pls. 121a, 143a; 1930: 320–321).

The sacred tree, for which Dukki Gel was probably named, was worshipped in this city before the Egyptian conquest, which suggests that originally the association of a divinity with the toponym of Pnubs was a Kushite concept (Ashby 2020: 107).

A Demotic graffito in the Western Colonnade at Philae, dated to Emperor Claudius (41 – 54 CE), seems to indicate that there was a council or society (*qnbt*) of Thoth of the *nbs*-tree in Philae (Griffith 1937: 48, ph. 36). Another Demotic graffito of the Roman Period, this one located in the so-called “Portico of Nectanebo” at Philae, attests that “His name endures here before ‘The man of the *zizyphus* tree,’ Petihorpakheret, son of Petipawer” (Griffith 1935: pl. XI, ph. 11; 1937: 44, ph. 11; Cruz-Uribe 2016: 49, GPH 11). This portico or kiosk, 7.6 × 11.5 meters in size, was the main building of the Thirtieth

Dynasty at Philae, erected under Nectanebo I (380 – 363 BCE). Now located at the south end of the island, it seems to have been moved in the mid-second century BCE and turned 180 degrees, as has been established from details of its decoration (Haeny 1985: 204–206, 224). Its shape and location seem to suggest that it served in its new position as a way-station. According to Cruz-Uribe (2016: 11), the Demotic graffiti for Thoth of Pnubs could also indicate that the most likely function of this portico after its removal would have been “to act as the central focus of those celebrations related to the cult of Thoth-*p3-nbs*, whose cult centered in el-Dakka in Nubia.”

In Philae, Thoth of Pnubs is also referred to in Demotic graffiti as “the one whom the Male has given” (Cruz-Uribe 2016: 11). He also appears figuratively in various scenes, for example, in a ritual scene in the mammisi of Philae, in which Ptolemy VIII Euergetes II presents him with *maat*. Thoth of Pnubs is also called, among other epithets, “Lord of *maat*, by whom he lives, who came from Nubia to [this place]” (Junker and Winter 1965: 69, 5–8). Also in the mammisi, Ptolemy XII Neos Dionysos offers wine to Arensnuphis, Thoth of Pnubs, and Amun-Ra (Junker and Winter 1965: 219, 10–14). Thoth is also designated as, among other epithets, the great god at the head of Biga (*hnt bwgm*) and the divine god at the head of Philae (*ntr ntr.j hnt jrk*). In the west corridor (*LD IV 76a*), Caligula offers a *hh*-sign to Arensnuphis, Thoth of Pnubs, and Tefnut. Thoth of Pnubs is called, with his first additional epithet, Lord of Philae (*nb jrk*), not Pselchis.

On the great pylon of Philae, Thoth of Pnubs was later added to a ritual scene dating to the time of Ptolemy XII, in which he offers wine to Isis (Junker 1958: fig. 19). The god, called “Thoth of Pnubs, Great God, Lord of Pselchis” (Junker 1958: 41, 16), was carved as a miniature figure above the king’s front foot, also facing Isis. He is depicted with his typical crown of four ostrich feathers, which just reach the king’s kilt. As Griffith (1937: 44, ph. 11) pointed out, nothing else remains in the temple that would suggest there was a society

or council worshipping this form of Thoth. Cruz-Uribe (2016: 13, no. 86) further speculated whether the southern end of Philae is an architectural map of the Dodekaschoinos, with the Portico of Nectanebo representing el-Dakka, i.e., the southernmost point of the Dodekaschoinos.

According to Kurth (1986: 511), Thoth of Pnubs is of Hermopolitan origin. Stadler (2009: 32) asserts that Thoth of Pnubs is a composite deity, who combines features of Thoth of Hermopolis and Shu, and who became Thoth of Pnubs (the settlement) because of the confusion with the *nbs*-tree. Both Thoth of Hermopolis and Thoth of Pnubs can be described as the one who comes from Nubia (Stadler 2009: 424 n. 166). In the temple of el-Dakka, the two forms of Thoth can appear right next to each other, for example in a ritual scene in the forecourt on the east side of the inner south wall, second register (*PM VII 44 [22]–[23]*; Roeder 1913, pls. 53–55; 1930: 136–138): Augustus presents a scribal palette to Thoth of Hermopolis, anthropomorphic with an ibis head, followed by Thoth of Pnubs and Tefnut with a lion head (fig. 3). Thoth of Pnubs is depicted in an entirely anthropomorphic form wearing his typical crown, the four feathers of Onuris, whose characteristics he assumes (Preys 2006: 145). Junker (1917: 8–9, 95) already saw in Thoth of Pnubs a manifestation of Onuris, or Shu, because they fulfilled the same role in the myth of the Return of the Distant Goddess.

Thoth of Pnubs plays a pivotal role in the myth of the Return of the Distant Goddess. In el-Dakka, he is depicted in a comprehensive scene (Roeder 1913: pl. 115; 1930: 312–313) as a standing baboon with arms raised to appease the lioness, designated as “Tefnut, daughter of Ra, residing in the Abaton” (fig. 4), and to convince her to return to Egypt to protect her father (for the Myth of the Sun’s Eye and animal fables, see Widmer 2003; von Lieven 2009; Braun 2020: 175–176). Directly above this scene are two symmetrically opposing ibis birds (fig. 5). Each holds a feather of *maat* and perches atop a shrine-like pedestal enclosing a lion. Above each of the two images is a winged sun disk.

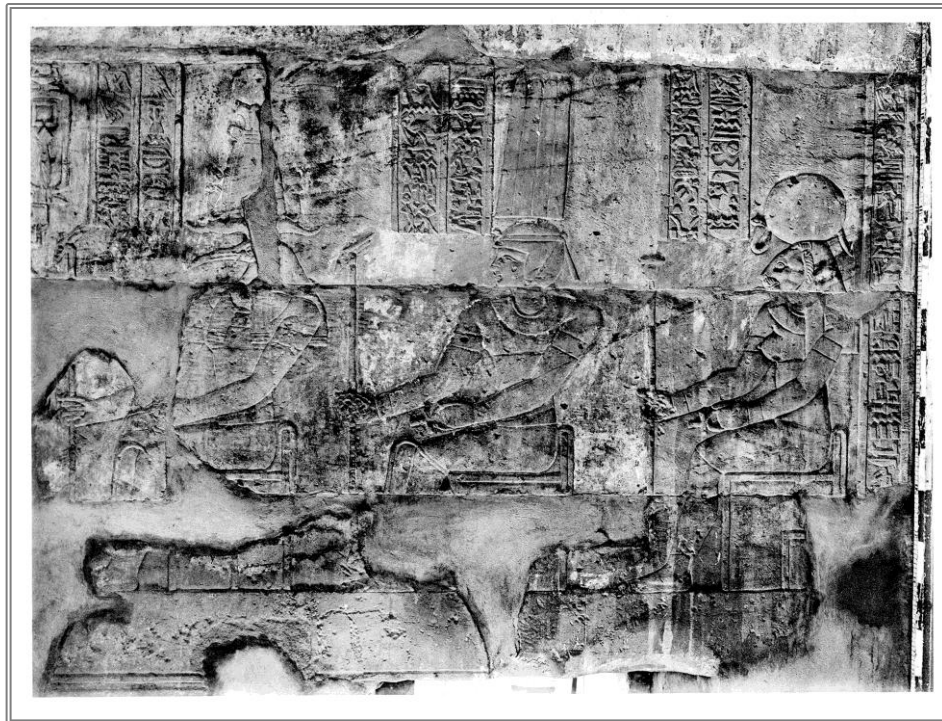


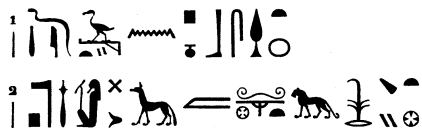
Figure 3. Thoth of Hermopolis, Thoth of Pnubs, and Tefnut, E side of the forecourt of el-Dakka Temple.



Figure 4. Thoth of Pnubs before Tefnut at el-Dakka.

The corresponding parts probably illustrate the twofold form of Thoth at el-Dakka: Thoth of Pnubs and Thoth of Hermopolis, both in the forms of an ibis and a lion.

At el-Dakka, Thoth of Pnubs is also characterized by epithets that clearly relate to his Nubian connection (for a complete list of his epithets, see Inconnu-Bocquillon 1988: 49–50), exemplified in a ritual scene on the west wall of the pronaos (*PM VII* 45 [27], bottom register), as recorded by Champollion (1835: pl. LVbis, 4). In this scene, already lost when Roeder (1930: 148–150 with fig. 21) visited the temple, Augustus offers wine to three deities, first the anthropomorphic Thoth, followed by Arensnuphis-Shu, and Tefnut. Thoth, again depicted with his typical Onuris-crown comprising four ostrich feathers, is called “Thoth of Pnubs, the very great god who comes from Nubia, the southern lion” (after Roeder 1930: 149):



Thoth of Pnubs, Lord of Pselchis, is also depicted in his anthropomorphic form in other temples in Lower Nubia, for example in the small Augustan temple of Dendur (Blackman 1911, e.g., 7 with pl. XIII, and 54 with pl. XLII), built by the Roman governor Petronius for Isis of Philae and two brothers and local heros, Pedesi and Pihor, who are known only from the temple’s decoration. The temple is now located in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (see Arnold 1999: 244). Thoth of Pnubs is further attested, again in human form and with the same attire, in the temple of Mandulis at Kalabsha (Gauthier 1911: 107, 9; 330, 3), in the temple of Isis at Philae, and in the temple of Amun at Debod, relocated to Madrid. In the latter temple he holds a *w3s*-sceptre together with a serpent and two scorpions (Roeder 1911: 39; pl. 106b).



Figure 5. The twofold ibis-form of Thoth at el-Dakka above a scene of Thoth before Tefnut.

The temple of el-Dakka was dedicated to Thoth of Pnubs, Lord of Pselchis/el-Dakka. Griffith (1937: 17) stated that “the religious success of the sacred ape under the *nubs*-tree at el-Dakka was evidently great, second only to that of Isis in her temple at Philae.” Thoth of Pnubs had close links to Philae. Indeed, he may have been created by Philae theologians, perhaps in the same way that the Dodekaschoinos Decree was created for Ptolemy IV Philopator in Philae. The oldest surviving version of the decree is engraved in the Ergamenes Chapel at el-Dakka, attesting a donation to Isis of the region between Philae and the Wadi Allaqi. Rather unconventionally, this decree is included in an offering scene, dedicated to the same goddess (Roeder 1913: pl. 100; 1930: 249–253; see also Kormysheva 1997; Locher 1997; 1999: 234–238). When Ergamenes (or Arkamani) II, c. 218 – 190 BCE, gained control over the region, including Philae, he confirmed the endowment by having it engraved at its southern end in the el-Dakka Temple.

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Abbreviations

LD

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- Figure 2. Thoth of Pnubs, at lower left, as a seated baboon under the *nbs*-tree in the Roman sanctuary of el-Dakka Temple. (Roeder 1930: pl. 143a.)
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- Figure 5. The twofold ibis-form of Thoth at el-Dakka above a scene of Thoth before Tefnut. (Roeder 1913: pl. 115.)