

## DEMONS (BENEVOLENT AND MALEVOLENT) العفاريت (الطيبة والمؤذية)

*Rita Lucarelli*

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## DEMONS (BENEVOLENT AND MALEVOLENT) العفاريت (الطيبة والمؤذية)

Rita Lucarelli

Dämonen (wohlwollend und böseartig)

Démons (bienveillant et malveillant)

*According to ancient Egyptian belief, the created world was populated by humans, spirits of deceased humans, deities, and a host of supernatural beings whose identities were never precisely defined. The Egyptian language refers to the first three categories as, respectively, rmt, sh or mwt, and ntr, but lacks a proper term for the fourth class. Egyptians nonetheless recognized the existence of these beings, and we are therefore justified in studying them as an ontological category. Instead of defining "demons" as a uniform group, the Egyptians gave specific names and occasionally physical attributes to its individual classes and members. These names and associated iconography do not so much characterize what these demons are as identify what they do. From the perspective of humans, their behavior can be benevolent and malevolent. Two main classes of demons can be recognized: wanderers and guardians. Wandering demons travel between this world and the beyond acting as emissaries for deities or on their own accord. They can bring diseases, nightly terrors, and misfortune and are therefore basically malevolent. Guardian demons are tied to a specific locality, either in the beyond or on earth, and protect their locality from intrusion and pollution; as such, their function is rather benevolent. In the Late and Ptolemaic and Roman Periods, they came to be regarded as deities in their own right and received cult.*

اعتقد المصري القديم أن العالم يسكنه الإنسان، وأرواح المتوفيين، والآلهة، والكثير من الكائنات اللاطبيعية التي لم يستخدم المصري القديم إسما محددًا لهذا النوع من الكائنات، فأطلق المصري القديم على الإنسان كلمة «رمتش»، وعلى أرواح المتوفيين «موت» أو «آخ»، وعلى الآلهة «نتشر»، ولكنه لم يطلق على الكائنات اللاطبيعية تعريف واحد، ولكن إعتبر المصري القديم أن هذه الكائنات حقيقية ولذلك يتم دراستها وإدراجها ضمن علم ما وراء الطبيعة. وعلى الرغم من أن المصري القديم لم يستخدم كلمة واحدة لوصف الكائنات اللاطبيعية، إلا أنه حدد أسماء عدة كائنات منها، وأحياناً أوضح شكل بعضها منها. هذه الأسماء والإيقونية المتعلقة بها لا تحدد نوع هذه العفاريت ولكن تحدد أدوارها. رأى الإنسان أن هذه العفاريت يمكن أن تكون طيبة أو مؤذية، فيمكن لنا تحديد نوعان من هذه العفاريت: المتجولة والحارسة، فتجولت العديد من هذه العفاريت ما بين هذا العالم وما وراءه بوصفها ممثلة للآلهة أو بمحض إرادتهم، ويمكن لهذه العفاريت المتجولة أن تجلب الأمراض، والاهوال ليلاً، وسوء الحظ، وبالتالي هي مؤذية. أما العفاريت الحارسة فهي مرتبطة بمكان محدد سواء بهذا العالم أو ما وراءه وتحمي منطقتها من أي أذى وبهذا تكون العفاريت الحارسة طيبة. أصبحت تلك العفاريت بمثابة آلهة بالعصور المتأخرة والبطلمية والرومانية حيث أصبح لهم طائفتهم الخاصة بهم.



Of all Egyptian religious concepts, the notion of “demon” has always been one of the most difficult to interpret for modern scholars. The first difficulty lies in the fact that Egyptian terminology and iconography usually do not distinguish ontologically between demon and deity. In fact, no ancient Egyptian term exists that would translate into “demon” and mark an obvious distinction between deity (*ntr*) and demon. Nonetheless, the scribal habit to often write the names of inimical beings in red ink and to add the evil or slain enemy determinative to their name shows that Egyptians recognized “malevolent demon” as an ontological category in its own right. It is only by comparing demons and deities with respect to their function, appearance, and status in the created world that we can come to an appreciation of demons in ancient Egyptian thought.

The main difference between demon and deity seems to be that demons received no cult, at least until the New Kingdom. Within the hierarchy of supernatural beings, demons are subordinate to the gods; although they possess special powers, these powers are not universal but rather limited in nature and scope. In general, their influence is circumscribed to one single task, and in certain cases they act under the command of a deity. The available sources do not elaborate on the origin of demons; nor are they explicitly mentioned in creation accounts. However, as they often act as emissaries of deities and are subjected to their will, we may deduce that demons are a creation of the gods. This hypothesis may find support in a formulation in one of the Oracular Amuletic Decrees, referring to protection against certain malevolent “gods who make a *wrt*-demon against a man” (Edwards 1960: T2 vs. 84 - 85: *ntrw ntyw jr wrt r rmt*; for *wrt*-demons, see below).

To be distinguished from demons are the roaming dead (*mwt*) and disembodied spirits (*sh*). Although occasionally showing a demonic nature, they are the manifestations of

deceased humans in the netherworld. They acquired their supernatural status only after a metaphysical transformation generated by death and ritual. While *mwt* beings are always malevolent, *sh* spirits can be either benevolent or malevolent. Demons, however, are entities in their own right. Nevertheless, demons and spirits of the dead are often listed together in apotropaic spells, because both can be hostile to humans.

Common understanding of the notion of demon, following the Christian reception of the Greek term *daimôn* in Late Antiquity, sees evil as the main essence of demonic entities as opposed to the notion of angels (Ahn 1997). Ancient Egyptian religion also relates the existence of demons to “evil”, which is believed to be the realm of chaos outside the created world (te Velde 1975: 980). However, although this negative connotation cannot be denied in light of the magical texts, the role of demons vis-à-vis the human world remains ambivalent and dependent on their specific context of appearance. In general, it can be stated that demons always act on the borders between order and chaos, *maat* and *isfet*. Therefore, in order to define the ancient Egyptian conception of demons, we may call them “religious frontier-striders” (Ahn 2006: 503), in reference to the apt German term *Grenzgängerkonzepte* (Ahn 1997). Some demons bring chaos into the ordered world or act upon the world of the living by command of the divine (e.g., the “wanderers”), whereas others mediate between order and chaos or the sacred and the profane by protecting liminal and sacred places on earth and in the netherworld from impurity (e.g., the “guardians”). In this sense, the Platonic definition of *daimôn* as an “intermediate being” between gods and mortals (Plato, *Symposium*, 202e) also fits the overall picture.

As regards their origin, locality, and forms of appearance, their multifaceted character and the general lack of uniform descriptions in the sources make it impossible to identify a single ontological category of demon. On the basis of nature and location, we can recognize

two main classes of demons, which have similar appearance and behavior towards humans: the wanderers and the guardians.

### *Classes of Demons*

Demons can manifest themselves and act as a single individual but also appear in pairs, in threes, or in a gang. A main distinction exists between demons traveling between the earth and the beyond, so-called “wanderers”, and those that are tied to, and watch over, a place, namely “guardians”.

Among the wanderers we find many gangs, often of unspecified number, which are controlled by major deities such as Ra and Osiris and act as the executioner of their divine will. They can be agents of punishment on earth and in the netherworld, like the *wꜣwtjw*, “the messengers”, which are mentioned in magical and ritual texts from the Middle Kingdom through the Ptolemaic and Roman Periods (Leitz 2002, Vol. 2: 364 - 366). In other cases, they cause ineluctable misfortune to humans without orders from the gods. As such they are agents of chaos that persists outside the order of the creation.

The evil influence of the wanderers can be warded off and kept at the borders of the human world by means of magic. However, it can never be fully destroyed. How exactly their nature was understood remains difficult to establish: they are divine emissaries but occasionally also act independently from the divine will. Moreover, it cannot be stated that these demons are truly subordinate to the gods, since as divine messengers they gain the authority of their senders. In fact, gods can also act as intermediaries or messengers of other deities, for example, Thoth (Kurth 2003: 50) and Hathor (Schipper 2007: 3 - 5), who occasionally serve as messengers of Ra.

Gods and demons alike, when playing the role of messengers, act with a single, precise aim, which can be directed against humankind. Besides *wꜣwtjw*, other gangs of wandering demons acting as divine emissaries are the *ḥꜣtjw*, “the slaughterers”, and the *šmꜣjw*, “the wanderers”, attested as early as the

Old Kingdom (*ḥꜣtjw* are mentioned in the Pyramid Texts) until the Ptolemaic and Roman Periods. They are sent as death- and plague-carriers by furious goddesses like Sakhmet and Bastet. At the end of the year, during the epagomenal days, their influence was considered especially strong on earth, as attested in the Calendars of Good and Bad Days (Leitz 1994: 244 - 255). Starting in the New Kingdom, but especially in the temple texts of the Ptolemaic and Roman Periods, *ḥꜣtjw* can also be manifestations of the dead decans (von Lieven 2000: 46 - 50), whose stars were also seen as disease-bringers. In the Late Period and Ptolemaic and Roman Periods, astrology gained prominence in ancient Egyptian religious thought, and, as a result, certain stars were demonized. For instance, certain astral bodies of the northern constellations, depicted on the astronomical ceilings of temples and tombs, find correspondences in the representations of the demonic inhabitants of the so-called “mounds (*jꜣwt*) of the netherworld” described in Spell 149 of the *Book of the Dead* (von Lieven 2000: 16 - 17, 27 - 28).

Wandering demons were also considered the cause of certain internal and mental diseases or symptoms, whose pathology was not understood; accordingly, many are mentioned in the magico-medical texts of the Middle Kingdom and later. Among others, the demon Sehaqeq (*shꜣkꜣk*) is seen as the cause of headache (Leitz 2002, Vol. 6: 444 - 445); he appears in a few Ramesside spells from Deir el-Medina and is once depicted as a young man covering his face (fig. 1). The *nsj*-demon and his female counterpart *nsjt* can affect various body parts and even bring death (Westendorf 1999: 379 - 382).

Nightmares (literally *ꜣꜣwt* *ꜣwt*, “bad dreams”; see Szpakowska 2003: 159 - 180) were also understood as caused by demons. Like the disease demons, nightmare demons were believed to enter a human body from the outside and are as such a sub-category of wandering demons. They are said to “descend upon a man in the night” (Papyrus Leiden I 348, v.2; see Szpakowska 2003: 168); in this

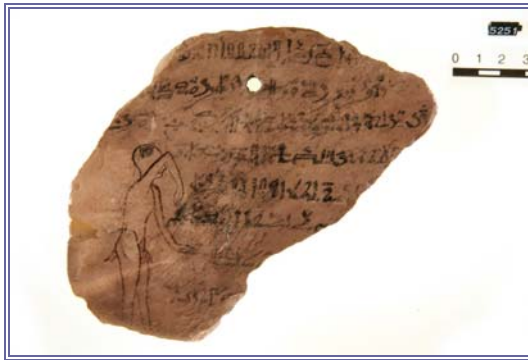


Figure 1. Sehaqeq, the headache demon. Ostrakon Leipzig, Ägyptisches Museum Georg Steindorff. Inv.-No. 5152.



Figure 2. Guardian demons of Spell 145 of the *Book of the Dead*.

sense, they can be considered the Egyptian equivalent of the Medieval *incubi* and *succubi*, although the characterization of sexual assault associated with the latter is not explicit in the Egyptian spells. Depictions of these roaming spirits are nonexistent except for the sketch of the headache demon Sehaqeq mentioned above (fig. 1). Occasionally, spells allude to their evil glance and warn them to turn their face backwards.

Demonic possession did not only occur during sleep at night; demons could attack or enter the human body also by day when the unlucky passerby approached their abode. Wandering demons also entered and haunted houses, as is evident in a list of the parts of a house to be defended against malevolent influences in a New Kingdom magical spell (Papyrus Chester Beatty VIII, vs. 1 - 2.4; see

Borghouts 1978: 10 - 11). They could also move between the earth and the beyond. In the beyond, when acting as guardians of the regions or gates of the netherworld, they could be benevolent towards the deceased, provided the latter possessed the magic to face them. On earth, their actions were mostly malevolent and connected to accidents and plagues—wreaking havoc without distinguishing among the virtuous and wicked.

Guardians represent the second class of demons. Their demonic activity is topographically defined, and their function can be rather benevolent towards those who have the secret knowledge of their names and know how to face them (Lucarelli 2006). They are usually attached to a specific place, where their power is truly effective, as, for example, the *wrt*-demons mentioned in the so-called Oracular Amuletic Decrees of the late 21<sup>st</sup> Dynasty (Edwards 1960) and later attested in Demotic texts as *wry*—although in this later form the only reference to a specific place is related to an astrological house. The *wrt*-demons are often connected to a natural place, which they inhabit, like a pool, a river, a mountain, etc., and from where they assault the passerby (Leitz 2002, Vol. 2: 506). Demons that can be defined by location have also been recognized in other systems of belief, among others in the Hellenistic world (Brenk 1986; Smith 1978).

The generally aggressive nature of the guardian demons is motivated by the need to protect their abode and is therefore sensible in some measure; as such, they are fundamentally different from disease demons, who invade the human body and other places they do not belong to. They abound in the beyond as guardians of gates and regions of the realm of the dead. They are described and depicted in detail in the spells 144 to 147 of the *Book of the Dead* (Guilhó 1999) and in the netherworld books (figs. 2 and 3). The dreadful nature of the guardian demons makes them also suitable for protecting sacred places; accordingly, they took on the role of temple genii in the Late and Ptolemaic Periods (Goyon 1985). The common



Figure 3. Guardian demons from a Guide of the Netherworld



Figure 4. Ammut, “the devourer of the dead”, from Spell 125 of the *Book of the Dead*.

Egyptological interpretation of demons as minor deities derives from these protective figures, which are often depicted with an animal head on an anthropomorphic or mummified body and holding knives or other weapons in their hands.

### Iconography

The guardians of the netherworld are often provided with an iconography. The other categories of demons, like the already mentioned *wrt*, are never depicted or physically described. The demonic guardians, on the other hand, are described in much detail and precision, because the deceased must be able to recognize them and know

their name in order to overcome their aggression.

Guardian demons have a hybrid human-animal appearance as in other ancient civilizations (Mesopotamia and Greece). In ancient Egypt, the theriomorphic traits of supernatural beings recall their wildest and most fearful aspects, stressing their “otherness” in contrast to the anthropomorphic forms, which denote humanization and membership of the civilized world. Animals often included in the composite bodies of demons are reptiles (especially snakes), felines, and canids; other mammals (donkeys, baboons, hippos, goats, bulls), insects, scorpions, and birds (falcons, vultures) can also be part of a demonic or divine body. This iconography does in essence not differ from the way deities are depicted in their animal and hybrid forms. The similarity is especially striking in the case of apotropaic entities that fight malevolent forces, for example, those represented on the so-called magic wands (Altenmüller 1977).

More typical of demonic iconography are fantastic animals. Sometimes they also show monstrous and grotesque iconographies combining two or more animals or animals and humans into one body (Kákósy 1982). The most popular example is that of Ammut, “the devourer of the dead”, of Spell 125 of the *Book of the Dead* (fig. 4), who has a crocodile head, a leonine body, and the hindquarters of a hippo. It is indeed in the netherworld that the creativity of the ancient Egyptian theologians in regard to the iconography of demonic beings reached its peak. Especially abundant in the funerary compositions are composite figures of demonic snakes with anthropomorphic legs, multiple heads, and wings, which serve as benevolent and malevolent guardians, like Nehebkau and Rerek. The gigantic python Apep is their archetypal model; however, because of his central and unique role as cosmic enemy of the sun god, Apep stands outside of the categories of gods and demons.

In the case of gods, hybrid and grotesque iconography symbolizes efficacious

apotropaic qualities, as in the case of Bes, the hippo goddesses Ipet and Taweret, and the sphinx god Tutu. This sort of evidence can be compared to the worldwide religious symbolism according to which supernatural beings who were able to transform into animals, like the werewolves and vampires of the Western folklore, were considered “border crossers” and therefore menacing entities for humankind (Holzapfel 2006: 74).

Besides fantastic and composite creatures, the netherworld was also the abode of animals who were considered dangerous (reptiles, insects) or impure on earth (pig, donkey). These belonged conceptually to the manifestation sphere of potentially destructive gods like Seth. A group of spells in the Pyramid Texts aims at warding off snakes, which could be considered enemies of the sun god (Leitz 1996; Meurer 2002: 269 - 291). Similar spells occur in the Coffin Texts (Osing 1987); spells 31 to 42 of the *Book of the Dead* are devoted to repelling dangerous and impure animals, including snakes. Magical and ritual objects and statues show demonic animals being submitted and controlled by anthropomorphic deities in a protective role; the most wide-spread examples are the New Kingdom ex-votos devoted to Horus-Shed and their later derivation, the Horus-stelae and healing statues, which represent deities that subject a host of dangerous animals. The subordinate role that theriomorphic demons play versus anthropomorphic deities or major humanized demons finds correspondences in other religious traditions, as in the iconography of the Mesopotamian demonic goddess Lamashtu, “mistress of animals”, who is often depicted while holding snakes in her hands and with a scorpion between her legs (van der Toorn 2003: 66 - 67).

### Gender

Most demonic beings are male; female demons occur only rarely in the sources. In general, gender does not give information about the behavior and function of demons, but a few remarks can be made in relation to female demons. They are generally hybrid or

animal in form, such as the already mentioned Ammut and the Two Meret snakes, which are the demonic forms of two goddesses mentioned in the Coffin Texts and Spell 37 of the *Book of the Dead*. An epithet that may refer specifically to female demons is the above mentioned *wrt* of the Oracular Amuletic Decrees (Edwards 1960, Vol. 1: xxii). Although the etymology and precise meaning of the term is unclear, it is remarkable that the same form occurs in combination with the definite article in the phrase *t3-wrt*, “The Great One”, which is the name for the hippo goddess Taweret and also an epithet for goddesses like Sakhmet or Isis, especially in the Late Period and later (Leitz 2002, Vol. 7: 331c, and Vol. 2: 478b). This evidence would confirm the female nature of the *wrt*-demons and also suggest that the demonic epithet originated from a euphemistic use of the divine one.

In the Oracular Amuletic Decrees as well as in other apotropaic spells (for instance, in pLeiden I 348, v.2; see Borghouts 1971: 32 - 33, 176 - 186), demonic beings are listed in pairs of male and female as *ꜥḥ* and *ꜥḥt* (“male and female spirit of a deceased”), *mwrt* and *mwrtt* (“male and female dead”), or *ḏꜣy* and *ḏꜣyt* (“male and female opponent”). However, instead of signaling the significance and uniqueness of female demons, such lists are in fact standard formulae that aim to capture the totality of possible dangers and do not really stress the gender issue. Occasionally, spells include the names of the father and mother of a demon, as, for example, the headache demon Sehaseq, whose parents have names of foreign origin. This suggests that kinship could serve as a classification system for demons; in this respect, Egypt differs from Mesopotamia, where demons are said to have no gender and no families (van der Toorn 2003: 68).

In general, gender does not seem to be relevant with respect to the role demons play on earth and in the netherworld. Perhaps the rare appearance of female demons may reflect the idea that the dynamic, active power of demons is a typically male characteristic. Be

this as it may, it must be kept in mind that most gangs of demons were controlled by angry goddesses like Sakhmet or Bastet, who incarnate the power and wild aspect of femininity. Magical texts also mention demons hiding themselves in females, for instance, in an Asiatic woman in the Spell for Mother and Child or in a “dead female who robs as a wailing woman” in a Ramesside spell for protecting different parts of the body (Borghouts 1971: 20, 97).

### *From Demon to Deity*

In sources dating to the Late Period, and even more so in sources from the Ptolemaic and Roman Periods, we notice an increased tendency to interpret daily life accidents and misfortune as resulting from demonic influence. Consequently, to appease them, demons started to receive local and private cults, as did Great-of-Strength (ꜥꜣ *phjt*), the first of the seven demons controlled by the

god Tutu (Kaper 2003: 61 - 62). Similarly, the *hꜣtjw*-demons seem to have received a cult in Ptolemaic Thebes (Thissen 1989: 30 - 33); they even feature in Demotic personal names with protective and apotropaic meaning (Lüddekens et al. 1980: 382 - 383, 1989: 679). Conversely, certain gods are demonized as they absorb the essence of the creatures they control, like the sphinx god Tutu, who bears the epithet of “master of demons” (Kaper 2003: 60 - 63).

Much later, in a corpus of Coptic magical spells, we find mention of a real demonic pantheon, consisting especially of demons of the underworld. They are invoked to harm personal enemies. Their punitive function and their specific tasks may well be reminiscent of the demons of Pharaonic times, who were sent to earth from the beyond and belonged to a peripheral world outside creation (Frankfurter 2007).

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Figure 1. Schaqeq, the headache demon. Ostrakon Leipzig, Ägyptisches Museum Georg Steindorff. Inv.-No. 5152. Courtesy of Ägyptisches Museum Georg Steindorff. Photograph by Marion Wenzel.

Figure 2. Guardian demons of Spell 145 of the *Book of the Dead*. (Heerma van Voss 1971: pl. 21.)

Figure 3. Guardian demons from a Guide of the Netherworld. (Niwinski 1989: pl. 48a.)

Figure 4. Ammut, “the devourer of the dead”, from Spell 125 of the *Book of the Dead*. (Gabolde 2006: fig. 8.)