

FOREIGN DEITIES IN EGYPT  
المعبودات الاجنبية في مصر

*Christiane Zivie-Coche*

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## FOREIGN DEITIES IN EGYPT

### المعبودات الاجنبية في مصر

Christiane Zivie-Coche

Ausländische Götter in Ägypten  
Dieux étrangers en Égypte

*The presence of foreign deities in the Egyptian pantheon must be studied in the light of the openness of Egyptian polytheism and as a reflection on cultural identity. Even if Egyptian self-identity was defined as intrinsically opposed to the Other, i.e. the foreigner, Egypt always maintained contact with its neighbors, particularly Nubia and the Near East. These intercultural contacts had an effect on the religion. Since the earliest times, deities like Dedoun, Ha, or Sopdu formed an integral part of the Egyptian pantheon, so much so that their likely foreign origin is not immediately perceptible. Particularly important is the introduction of a series of Near Eastern deities into the established pantheon at the beginning of the New Kingdom, under the reign of Amenhotep II. Receiving cult from both the state and private individuals, these deities were worshiped under their foreign name while depicted in Egyptian fashion. Their principal function was providing protection. It is the very nature of Egyptian polytheism that allowed for foreign divinities to acquire the same status as the indigenous gods.*

إن وجود الآلهة الأجنبية في مجمع الآلهة المصري أمرٌ يجب دراسته في ضوء إنفتاح تعدد الآلهة المصرية وكنعكاس الهوية الثقافية. حتى وإن كانت هوية المصريين الذاتية معروفة بالفطرة ضد «الأخر» – أي الأجنبي - فمع ذلك كان لمصر دائماً علاقة جيدة مع جيرانها خاصةً بلاد النوبة والشرق الأدنى. و كان لهذه الإتصالات الحضارية المتعددة تأثيرٌ على الدين، فمنذ بواكير العصور القديمة كانت الآلهة الأجنبية مثل «ديدون» و«حا»، أو «سوبدو» أصبحت وبشكل كبير جداً جزء لا يتجزأ من مجمع الآلهة المصري لدرجة أن أصلهم الأجنبي أصبح غير ملحوظ بطريق مباشر. ومما هو جدير بالملاحظة إنه تم إدخال مجموعة من آلهة الشرق الأدنى إلى مجمع الآلهة المصري الرسمي منذ بداية الدولة الحديثة وخاصةً خلال عصر أمنحتب الثاني هو أمرٌ ذو أهمية خاصة، حيث قدمت الشعائر والطقوس إلى هذه الآلهة من قِبَل الدولة و من قِبَل الأفراد العاديين وقد احتفظوا باسمائهم الأجنبية ولكن تم تصويرهم على هيئة مصرية ، وكانت وظيفتهم الأساسية هي توفير الحماية. إن طبيعة العقيدة المصرية هي التي أتاحت للآلهة الأجنبية الحصول علي نفس وضع الآلهة المصرية.

**O**ne could qualify a deity as foreign to the Egyptian pantheon when it has a well-established, non-native origin and is known to have been introduced into Egypt at a specific point in time. Deities

that were always associated with Egypt's frontier zones and formed part of the Egyptian pantheon since the earliest times are not considered foreign. Such deities are the Nubian Dedoun attested since the Pyramid

Texts; Ha, god of the West, who is likely Libyan in origin; and also Sopdu, Lord of the East and the eastern borders, whose symbol *spd*, which serves to write his name in hieroglyphs, bears a resemblance to the Near Eastern betyles or sacred stones. There were also deities of truly Egyptian origin that held power over these marginal regions. Min of Coptos was the Lord of the Eastern Desert and Hathor, besides being a goddess of love and sexual desire, was very much an itinerant deity, honored at the mining sites in the Sinai and Byblos in the Lebanon. This state of affairs reveals, even without considering the principles of interculturality, that Egypt was not the self-contained and closed-off country some scholars make it to be. The border crosser par excellence was Seth, who embodies this role in all his ambiguity, being the protector of the sun god in the solar bark, the murderer of his brother Osiris, and the god of the deserts, disturbing and threatening—a trickster. His Otherness led to assimilation with the Near Eastern deity Ba'al in the New Kingdom. At the end of the Third Intermediate Period or the beginning of the Late Period, his “demonization” led to almost complete exclusion from the Egyptian pantheon, when he was regarded solely in his role as fearful enemy of Osiris, and even more so of Egypt as a unified state and society through his identification with foreigners in general (te Velde 1967: 138 - 151). The dangerous Other was thus not necessarily located outside the group of Egypt’s familiar deities, but could be found in their very midst.

Contacts with foreign cultures, however well established, did not necessarily lead to the introduction of foreign deities on Egyptian soil. The most striking example is that of the Libyan immigration, which eventually brought the 22<sup>nd</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> Dynasties to power. These kings were descendants of families coming from the west, and later the “great chiefs” of the Ma or the Libou, who governed principalities of different size after the disintegration of Pharaonic rule in the first quarter of the first millennium BCE. Even if contemporary proper names attest to the popularity of theophoric names composed

with, for example, the name of the Libyan goddess Shehededet, no trace of a cult for this deity has been recovered (Thirion 1986: 134 - 136). In fact, the Libyans seem to have had no influence on Egyptian religious practices; on the contrary, they adopted them. The same applies to the Kushite Dynasty (722 - 664 BCE) and the Persian invaders (525 - 404 and 343 - 332 BCE). They both showed great piety toward the Egyptian deities, with the exception of the Second Persian Domination (343 - 332 BCE), and did not “import” their own gods. The Ptolemaic and Roman Periods witnessed the creation of a deity of Egyptian origin represented in Greek style, Serapis, a combination of Osiris with Apis. Traditional Egyptian deities could thus undergo the effects of acculturation under the influence of foreign domination, in particular on the level of iconography. Other examples are Harpocrates (Horus the Child) and Isis, who, as terracotta figurines, are always represented in Greek style.

The deities that can truly be considered foreign in the Egyptian pantheon are primarily deities of Near Eastern, west-Semitic origin, most notably Reshep, Hauron, Ba'al, Astarte, Anat, Qadesh, and a few others. They were introduced in the New Kingdom, more precisely in the reign of Amenhotep II, with the exception of Anat who did not appear, according to the documents at our disposal, before the reign of Ramesses II. Despite historical changes, they remained in the Egyptian pantheon up into the Roman Period.

### *Historical and Cultural Context*

During the periods preceding the New Kingdom, interaction with people from the Near East was mainly with those who had settled more or less permanently in Egypt, primarily in the north of the country. The most significant episode was that of the Hyksos, “rulers of foreign lands,” who, for about one century, ruled in the Delta with Avaris (Tell el-Dabaa) as their capital. Excavations at the site have revealed obvious Near Eastern cultural influences, particularly in the funerary domain (Bietak 1996). As

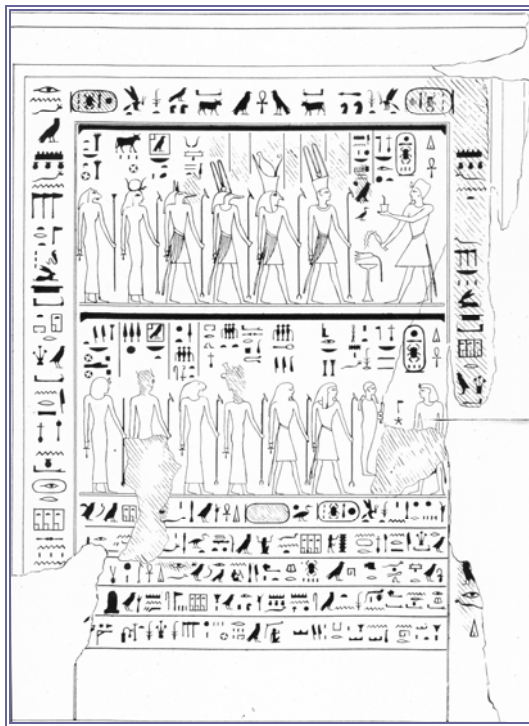


Figure 1. Astarte of Peru-nefer on a rock-cut stela from Tura (lower register, fourth deity from the left). Year 4 of Amenhotep II.

regards cult, however, there is no evidence to affirm, as certain scholars do, that the Near Eastern Ba'al or Anat received cult there. The epigraphic documents, few in number, mention Seth but never Ba'al, whereas Anat occurs only once as a component in a theophoric name (Schneider 1998: 133). One can only conclude that Seth was the principle deity, if not the sole one, adopted by the Hyksos.

After the reconquest of the territory and the installation of the 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, Egypt rapidly opened up to the Near East, the Mediterranean coast, Ugarit, and Mitanni; this was at first achieved primarily through military conquest and subsequent subjugation of the Near East to Egypt, but eventually also through marriage alliances with the Mitanni and the Hittites, as well as economic and linguistic exchange. As much as the Egyptians erected cult places for their own deities in the foreign cities they dominated, most likely to serve soldiers stationed in these posts or functionaries on mission, they also brought

back deities encountered abroad. These new cults installed at several locations in Egypt have often been taken as initiatives of foreigners—prisoners of war serving in the estates of temple or king, who continued their own cults (Stadelmann 1967: 146 - 150).

The available documentation indicates otherwise. The first mentions of Reshep, Hauron, and Astarte occur in royal documents dating to the beginning of the reign of Amenhotep II (1425 - 1399 BCE): the Victory Stela of Memphis, a rock stela of year 4 in a quarry at Tura (opposite Memphis; fig. 1), the Sphinx Stela at Giza from the beginning of his reign, foundation plaques of the chapel of Harmachis at Giza, and the so-called Astarte Papyrus mentioning his regnal year 5. As for Qadesh, the earliest attestation dates to the reign of Amenhotep III (1389 - 1349 BCE) occurring on a statue of Ptahankh, an associate of the high priesthood of Ptah. All these documents share another particularity: they come from Memphis and make frequent allusions to Peru-nefer, the port of Memphis with an important military and economic function. Peru-nefer had a pantheon that was quite unique, comprising the majority of known foreign gods under the aegis of Amun "Lord of Peru-nefer," whose membership has recently been established (Collombert and Coulon 2000: 217 - 219). Far from signaling the presence of foreigners, these documents translate an all too clear willingness, political and religious, on the part of the state to put new cults in place. If this were not the case, how can the presence of foreign deities on royal monuments be explained? The same maneuver can be seen in the 19<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, when Ramesses II (1290 - 1224 BCE) declares himself protected and beloved by the goddess Anat and lets himself be represented at her side in two monumental dyads (fig. 2), or even figures as a child underneath the throat of the Hauron-falcon (fig. 3)—all statues erected at Pi-Ramesses. The same pharaoh erected a stela commemorating the 400<sup>th</sup> year of rule of Seth depicted as Ba'al (fig. 4). Once officially adopted, these deities became widespread in Egypt, occasionally as far south as Nubia. Outside of Memphis, it is Thebes, the official



Figure 2. Dyad associating Anat and Ramesses II. Tanis. Cairo JE 56366.



Figure 3. Hauron-falcon protecting the child Ramesses II. Tanis. Cairo JE 64735.

capital, which has provided most documentation and, to a lesser extent, the



Figure 4. Seth(-Ba'al) of Ramesses on the 400 Year Stela facing Ramesses II and the vizier Sety. Tanis. Cairo JE 60539.

Delta. Here, foreign deities were, with more or less success, venerated by private individuals.

### *Polytheism and Otherness*

Like so many other traditional societies, Egypt defined itself ethnocentrically as the center and origin of civilization. Egyptians are “humans” (*ḥmt*), whereas foreigners are called by their ethnic name. The foreigner is the Other; a being that does not speak Egyptian and is a source of danger and disorder. This explains the innumerable representations, from the Old Kingdom up into the Roman Period, that depict the king holding several foreign enemies by their hair, ready to sever their heads. If only symbolic in meaning, this violent image lays bare how the Other is viewed in Pharaonic ideology. The cosmic, political, and social order, embodied in Maat and upheld by the king, is perpetually menaced by the Other. This Other can be an earthly enemy, like a foreigner, but also a divine enemy, like Apep, the snake that each day threatens the journey of the bark of Ra along the sky and through the duat. This fragile equilibrium can only be maintained by the daily performance of rituals.

In contrast with this ideology, there was a practical reality, which, since the earliest times, encouraged Egyptians to interact with foreigners, and not only in a military context, to learn foreign languages and to use translators, and to increase foreign trade. This

opening up to the world eventually led to changes in religious beliefs. Hymns written during the New Kingdom evoke the demiurge as creator of all peoples, distinguished by the color of their skin and speaking in different tongues since the time of creation (*Great Aten Hymn*; Murnane 1995: 114). The cosmographic books, found in the royal tombs of the New Kingdom, depict the four races—Egyptian, Nubian, Libyan, and Asiatic—as participating in the afterlife in the Egyptian duat (*Book of Gates*, 5<sup>th</sup> hour; Hornung 1979: 176 - 181). The demiurge is now recognized, in a non-theoretical way, as the creator of all humanity.

What is the status of foreign deities in such a worldview? The existence of foreign gods or the gods of foreigners, despite evident ethnocentric tendencies, could easily be accepted into the framework and worldview of Egyptian religion, because it is polytheistic. Egyptian polytheism accepts every other deity, every new deity, as such, based as it is on the principle of plurality of divine beings, forms, and names. Not based on the principles of truth and exclusion, the existence of no deity can be refuted on the ground of falsity. This is not a matter of what one calls today religious tolerance, but a fundamentally different concept of the divine, which allows for the addition, if the need is felt, of a new deity in a long-established pantheon—irrespective of the deity’s origin, as it is of the same nature as those deities with which it will be integrated.

### *Names and Epithets*

When introduced into the Egyptian world of the divine, foreign deities were qualified as *netjer*, “god,” like indigenous deities. In every case, their original name was preserved, transcribed into Egyptian hieroglyphic or hieratic with so-called syllabic-writing, a common method to transcribe words of Semitic origin into Egyptian. One can therefore not speak of an *interpretatio aegyptiaca*: foreign deities were not simply equated with Egyptian deities of a similar nature, but fully adopted into the pantheon. There are, however, some particular cases. Hauron was



Figure 5. Stela in the name of Tutuia, representing Hauron in the form of the Great Sphinx at Giza. New Kingdom. Cairo JE 72264.

so closely associated with Harmachis, name of the Great Sphinx of Giza in the New Kingdom, that one addressed him indifferently as Harmachis, Hauron, or Hauron-Harmachis (fig. 5; Zivie 1976: 312 - 316). As regards Ba’al, his name is often written with the Seth-animal as its determinative, a sign that could also serve as an ideogram for writing the name of Seth. One could consider reading the name as Ba’al-Seth; whatever the case, it reveals that Egyptians felt a close association between the two deities. Moreover, in documents of the Ramesside Period there is an image of an easternized god with exotic clothing that is always accompanied by the name of Seth (Cornelius 1994: pls. 34 - 40). Two aspects are combined here: a Seth-Ba’al, an Egyptian deity made eastern to convey Egyptian power across the borders, and a Ba’al-Seth, an eastern deity installed at Memphis and later elsewhere in Egypt. The goddess Qadesh, who is not a simple hypostasis of Astarte and Anat, represents a unique case, because her name is an Egyptian invention (Zivie-Coche

1994: 71). Using the Semitic root q-d-š, Egyptians created the theonym, “the Blessed,” which was otherwise unknown in the ancient Near East.

The epithets associated with these deities only rarely give information about the deity’s geographical origin. For example, an epithet on a sphinx statuette indicates that Hauron is originally from Lebanon (Leibovitch 1944: 171), and a private stela (Copenhagen AIN 134) records that Astarte is from *Kharou* (Syria; Ranke 1932: 412 - 418). Their origin was neither forgotten nor unknown but held little importance in the new Egyptian setting. Most epithets are rather commonplace, expressing the power of the divinity (“great god”) and its celestial role (“lord/lady of the sky”); goddesses were often called “Mistress of the Gods” or “Mistress of the Two Lands.” Occasionally, family ties are specified: Astarte is the daughter of Ptah of Memphis, or of Ra, as is Anat. These two goddesses are frequently associated, without their sisterhood being clearly stated. They may also play a role in an Egyptian myth. For example, in the Harris Magical Papyrus, Anat and Astarte appear to be pregnant by Seth, but are unable to deliver the baby (P. London BM 10042 r° III, 5 - 10; Leitz 1999: 35, pl. 14).

### *Iconography*

Upon their adoption into Egypt, a visual image had to be developed for the newcomers, whose iconography was neither well established nor often represented in their region of origin. The preserved documents, statues, stelae, and temple reliefs show that their visual form followed the Egyptian model and its stringent rules of representation. Foreign deities can be recognized by attributes, which serve less to mark their “foreignness” than their function and character. Thus, Reshep, who may be dressed with an Egyptian loincloth or a Syrian kilt with shoulder strap, is shown with an Egyptian divine beard or with the Asiatic pointed goatee while wearing a crown similar to the Egyptian white crown (fig. 6). The crown is often adorned with two floating



Figure 6. Stela in the name of Pashed, representing Reshep seated on a throne. 19<sup>th</sup> Dynasty. Deir el-Medina. Cambridge E.G.A. 3002.1943.

ribbons and a gazelle head in place of a uraeus. This symbol is by no means characteristic of the Asiatic god: Shed, the child archer god, is equipped with it likewise. Reshep is generally represented with shield, quiver, and arrows, which do not mark him as a god of war but a god ensuring protection of those who invoke him. The image of Ba’al or rather of Seth-Ba’al is not very different, except that he is unarmed and wears a slightly different crown. Hauron is the only foreign deity to have adopted a mixed form of half animal, half human body. He is represented as a sphinx or a human with falcon head, which both are Egyptian forms of old and closely associated with the deity Harmachis. Astarte, mistress of horses, is represented as a young woman, sometimes androgynous, on horseback. Qadesh is recognizable by the fact that she is represented frontally, generally nude, while standing on a lion, holding serpents and a bouquet of papyrus in her hands and donned with a Hathor wig that is occasionally surmounted by different crowns (fig. 7). Frontal representation and nudity are rare in Egyptian iconography, though not

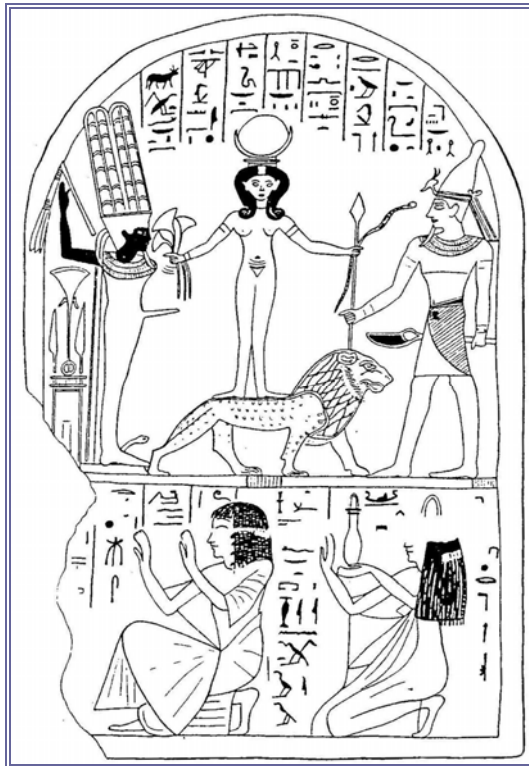


Figure 7. Qadsh between Reshep and Min on a stela dedicated by Ramose. 19<sup>th</sup> Dynasty. Deir el-Medina. Turin 50066.

unique to Qadsh; they can also be observed in child deities, such as Horus on the Crocodiles, and Bes, the deformed dwarf with prophylactic power. In conclusion, the attributes serve to identify the deities in the same way as indigenous gods without marking them as foreign per se. Once created in Egypt, this imagery exerted in return a strong influence on the iconography of the Near East in the second millennium BCE, which was largely Egyptianized. The iconographic motifs found at Ugarit, on Cyprus, and later in Phoenicia testify to the impact of Egyptian culture in these regions.

### *Cult*

The cult rendered to these deities, once integrated in Egypt, appears to have been Egyptian in form, with Egyptians as devotees and cult specialists. It cannot be excluded that immigrants from the Near East rendered cult to them as well. However, neither proper

names nor professional titles in private documents allow the conclusion, as has often been stated, that these cults testify to the presence of foreign communities that maintained their deities and customs. For example, in the Memphite region and in Deir el-Medina, where several foreign deities were worshipped, the devotees were fully integrated into Egyptian society. It is true that no major temples were ever dedicated to these deities, as their significance was never big enough, but in this respect they resemble indigenous deities of limited local importance. Being protectors of the king, private individuals turned to them for help and protection, in conformity with the principles of personal piety, a religious phenomenon that became prevalent in the New Kingdom. The scribes of the Houses of Life, who composed formularies like the Magical Papyrus Harris, Papyrus Chester Beatty VII, and Papyrus Leiden I 348, often invoked foreign deities as an efficacious cure against scorpion stings, serpent bites, and various diseases and illnesses, in the same way they invoked Seth, Isis, or others. In other words, these deities had acquired an identity proper to Egypt, which only partially depended upon their original characteristics.

### *Why Foreign Deities?*

Deities of the ancient Near East were thus introduced through official channels into the Egyptian pantheon from the 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty onwards, which is not so surprising given the close relations between centralized government and religion in ancient Egypt. The question remains, though, if there is a clear answer to why these deities were adopted, enabling them eventually to play a role in all domains of Egyptian religion. Theologically, nothing prevented the presence of foreign deities in the Egyptian pantheon. After a period of occupation followed by reconquest of its territory, Egypt affirmed its supremacy over its neighbors, while appropriating some of their practices and technical innovations, thus showing a certain degree of permeability to other cultures. In this process, foreign deities, at least some of

them, were able to be “imported” into Egypt’s imaginary world. They represented an additional, new, and beneficial force, which could be claimed by the king and, following his example, by priests and private individuals alike, either in an official setting or as refuge in private life. The validity of Egyptian religion was neither measured by the rejection

of deities of other peoples nor by the denial of their existence and veracity. On the contrary, the principle of polytheism allowed for integrating new deities without challenging its conception of the world of the divine, but instead enriching and diversifying it.

- Translated from the French by Jacco Dieleman

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A comprehensive study of the nature, function, and spread of Near Eastern deities in ancient Egypt is Stadelmann (1967); many new sources have come to light since its publication. Cornelius (1994) is a detailed and well illustrated study of the iconography of the gods Reshep and Ba'al; Lipinski (1996) is a review article of this book including discussions of Hauron and Anat. The iconography of Anat and Astarte are addressed in Cornelius (2000); a comprehensive catalog, including Qadesh, is Cornelius (2004). For Hauron, see van Dijk (1989) and Lilyquist (1994); the close associations between Harmachis and Hauron are discussed in Zivie (1976: 305 - 328). Why they were adopted into New Kingdom Egypt is addressed in Tazawa (2009). On the various modes and channels of adopting foreign gods into Egypt, see Helck (1966). A crucial resource for studying relations between Egypt and the Near East remains Helck (1971: 446 - 473). Acculturation in New Kingdom Egypt is the topic of Schneider (2003, 2006). Issues of alterity in Egyptian religion are addressed in Zivie-Coche (1994).

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- Figure 1. Astarte of Peru-nefer on a rock-cut stela from Tura (lower register, fourth deity from the left). Year 4 of Amenhotep II. (After Vyse 1842: pl. opposite p. 95.)
- Figure 2. Dyad associating Anat and Ramesses II. Tanis. Cairo JE 56366. Photo Archives Montet, Centre Golenischeff, EPHE, Paris.
- Figure 3. Hauron-falcon protecting the child Ramesses II. Tanis. Cairo JE 64735. Photo Archives Montet, Centre Golenischeff, EPHE, Paris.
- Figure 4. Seth(-Ba'al) of Ramesses on the 400 Year Stela facing Ramesses II and the vizier Sety. Tanis. Cairo JE 60539. (After Montet 1933: pl. XIII.)
- Figure 5. Stela in the name of Tutuia, representing Hauron in the form of the Great Sphinx at Giza. New Kingdom. Cairo JE 72264. Photograph by J. J. Clère.
- Figure 6. Stela in the name of Pashed, representing Reshep seated on a throne. 19<sup>th</sup> Dynasty. Deir el-Medina. Cambridge E.G.A. 3002.1943. (After Martin 2005: 74.)
- Figure 7. Qadesh between Reshep and Min on a stela dedicated by Ramose. 19<sup>th</sup> Dynasty. Deir el-Medina. Turin 50066. (After Keel 1992: 243, fig. 211.)