



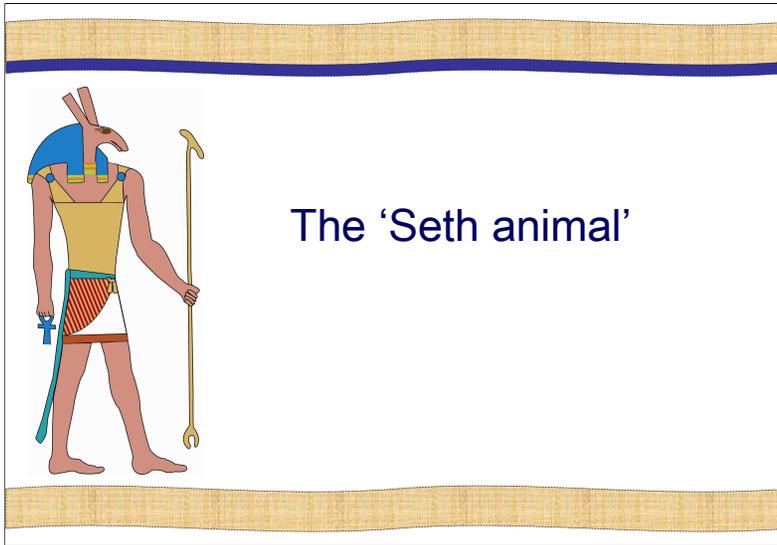
SETH : EGYPTIAN CHIMERA

OR

AFRICAN TRICKSTER ?

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The 'Seth animal'



« Unlike creatures such as the crocodile, the Seth-animal is not easily identifiable in the modern animal world; indeed, [there is now a general agreement among Egyptologists that it was never a real creature](#) and that it existed only in the ancient Egyptian imagination.»

A.McDonald, 2000.

« However, in the past there were many attempts to find the Seth animal in nature. »

Ibidem



The attempts were made mainly by zoologists.

Identification proposals included:

ass, oryx, antelope, greyhound, fennec, jerboa, camel, okapi, long-snouted mouse, aardvark, giraffe, hog, boar, hare, jackal, tapir, long-snouted mormyr, a bird, a dog, a snake, an auroch, even a desiccated bull's phallus.





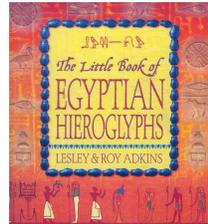
« Although many attempts have been made to determine the zoological identity of the Seth-animal, it seems to be a fabulous animal. »

H. te Velde, *Lexikon*, 2003

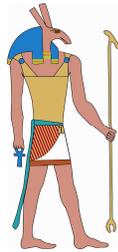
« It seems best to hold on to the original suggestion of the father of Egyptology, Jean-François Champollion that the Seth-animal is in origin an '*animal monstrueux*'. »

H. te Velde, 1992



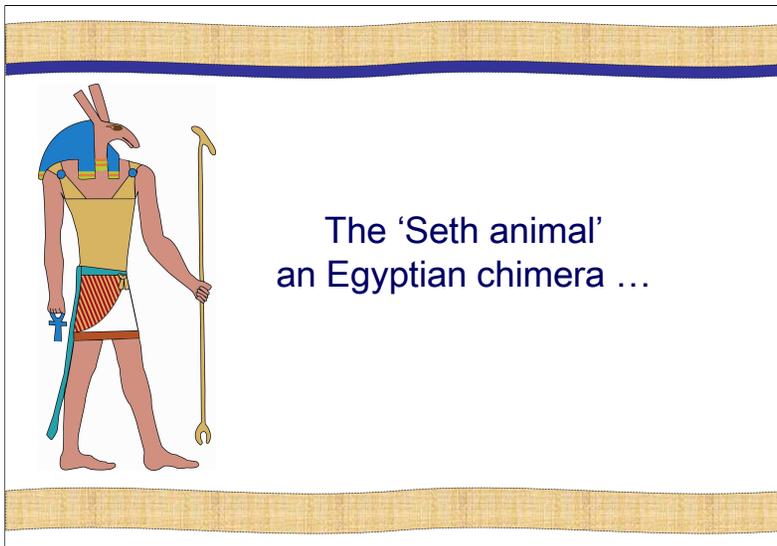


Seth 𐎗𐎍𐎏𐎖 or the single hieroglyph 𐎗 or 𐎖.
Represented as the 'Seth animal' (𐎖), an imaginary creature similar to a jackal, or as a man with a 'Seth animal' head, the god Seth was the embodiment of evil. In myth, Seth killed his brother Osiris and usurped the throne. Seth was eventually defeated by Horus, the son of Osiris. Seth came to be regarded as lord of the desert and of non-Egyptian lands. He took up a position in the solar boat, which was used by the sun to travel through the underworld each night, and helped to fight off attacks from the serpent Apophis. He also controlled the weather.

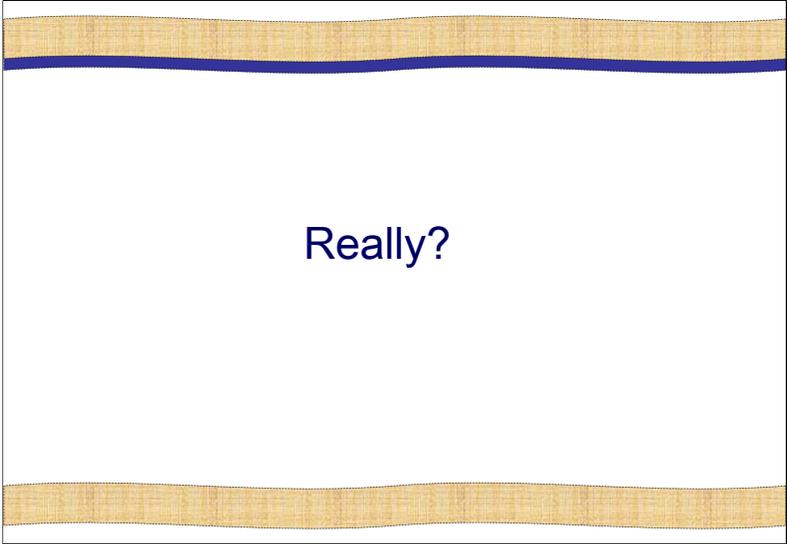


Seth

Il est maudit. Ceci à cause de son rôle funeste dans la légende osirienne. De plus, ce dieu de Haute-Égypte a aggravé son cas en se présentant aux hommes sous les traits d'un animal non identifiable. On sait toutefois qu'il a un museau effilé et des oreilles droites et hautes.



The 'Seth animal'
an Egyptian chimera ...



Really?

Whether or not it was a real animal, the Seth animal had significance for the Egyptians.

Its' hieroglyph is one of the most frequently attested animal determinatives.



It occurs in words associated with disruption of the normal *status quo*.

4 main categories:

- aggression
- noise
- medical
- meteorological

MEDICAL

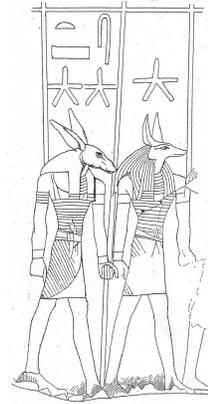
١٠٤ *ib* ILLNESS
١٠٤ *ind* AFFLICTION
١٠٤ *nr* TO BE ILL
١٠٤ *nm* TO SUFFER

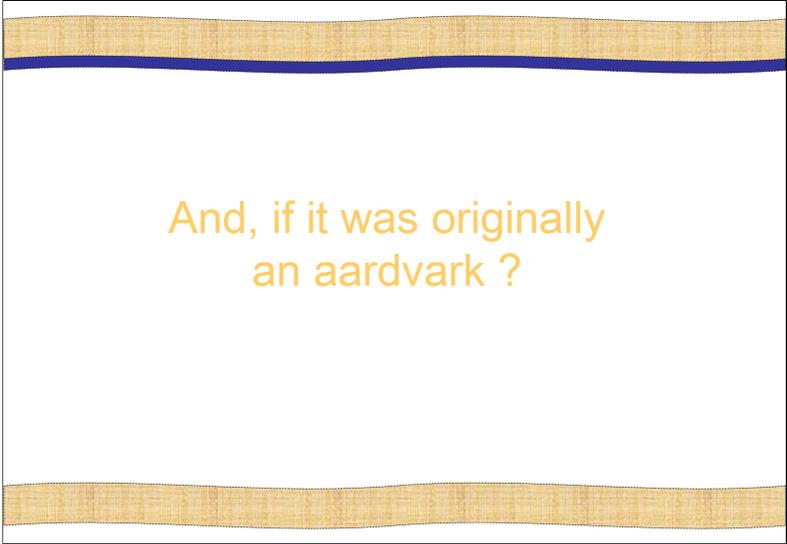
METEOROLOGICAL

١٠٤ *zn* STORM
١٠٤ *zm* RAIN
١٠٤ *pbpb* STORM
١٠٤ *srk* SNOW
١٠٤ *hkhk* STORM

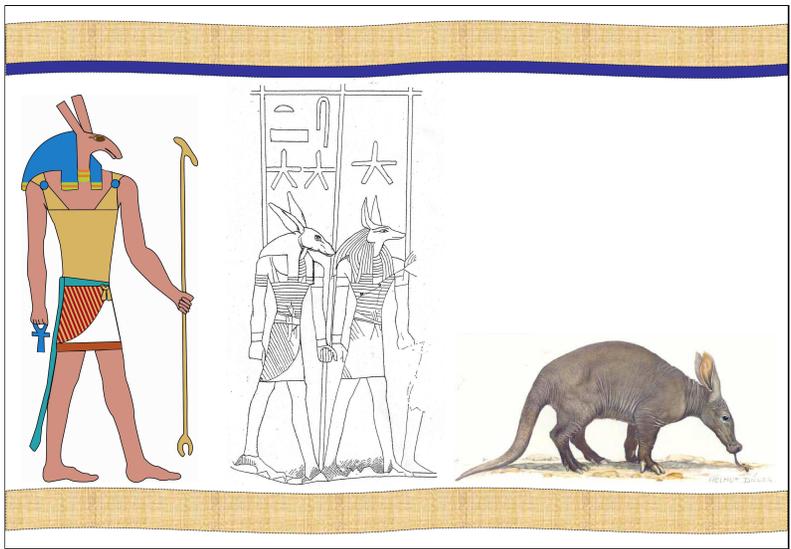
But Egyptologists have been clueless about the reason behind the association.

What was it about the mysterious Seth animal that conveyed so well the concepts it was chosen to represent ?





And, if it was originally
an aardvark ?



At first sight, there are many striking resemblances between the iconography of the Seth animal and the aardvark:

- a long downward-pointing snout
- pricked ears
- a stocky quadruped
- paws and not hooves
- a long tail
- the possibility to adopt the three positions shematized in hieroglyphs



The two earliest clearly identifiable depictions of the Seth animal
are on the king Scorpion Macehead



Possible hindrances to this identification:

- ▶ the square-tipped ears
- ▶ and the erected tail



But the ears of the aardvark look sometimes squarred-off

For the Egyptians, the raised tail is a characteristic of an aggressive animal as shown by A. McDonald (2000).

An aardvark identification was proposed many times by zoologists:

- 1864 Hartman & Bilharz, Brehm, Heuglin
- 1878 Isambert & Chauvet
- 1908 Lortet & Gaillard
- 1913 Schweinfurth
- 1946 Frechkop
- 1971 Kingdon

But, since Keimer 1944, this identification has been rejected.

However Keimer was the first to suggest the aardvark representation on Predynastic pottery.

Predynastic

- 3 aardvark representations on a Nagada III elongated jar dated about 3200-3300 BC from Nag-ed-Deir.

(Keimer 1944)



- 2 possible aardvark representations on a Nagada II C or D jar, in a boat, associated with a man.

(Graff & Manlius 2003)



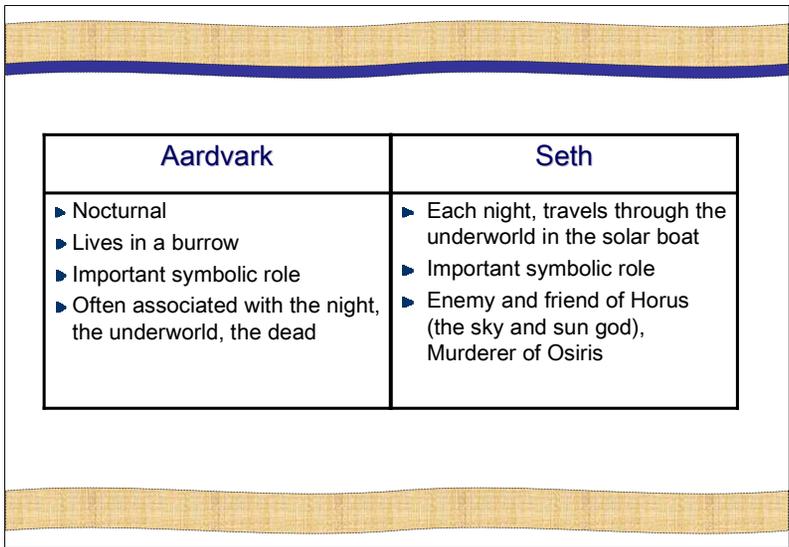
Was the aardvark known to the Early Egyptians?

- Present day distribution: south of the Sahara
- No faunal remains found in the Egyptian Nile Valley so far
- But evidence in 3 sites north of Khartoum (dated between C. 5500 and 4200 BC)
- Rock art in Sahara
- ➡ may have been known at the fringe of Egyptian territories





But what about
sub-Saharan Africa ?



Aardvark	Seth
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Nocturnal▶ Lives in a burrow▶ Important symbolic role▶ Often associated with the night, the underworld, the dead	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Each night, travels through the underworld in the solar boat▶ Important symbolic role▶ Enemy and friend of Horus (the sky and sun god), Murderer of Osiris

Aardvark: important symbolic role in many ethnic groups through sub-Saharan Africa

■ **Tabwa** (RDC): evokes major opposition:

head/loins , closed/open , intellect/sexuality, culture/nature ,
human/animal, male/female, light/darkness ,
visible/invisible , good/evil

■ **Tshokwe** (Angola – RDC): symbol of the past in contact with the underworld, the dead.

■ **Luba** (RDC) : human like, reincarnation

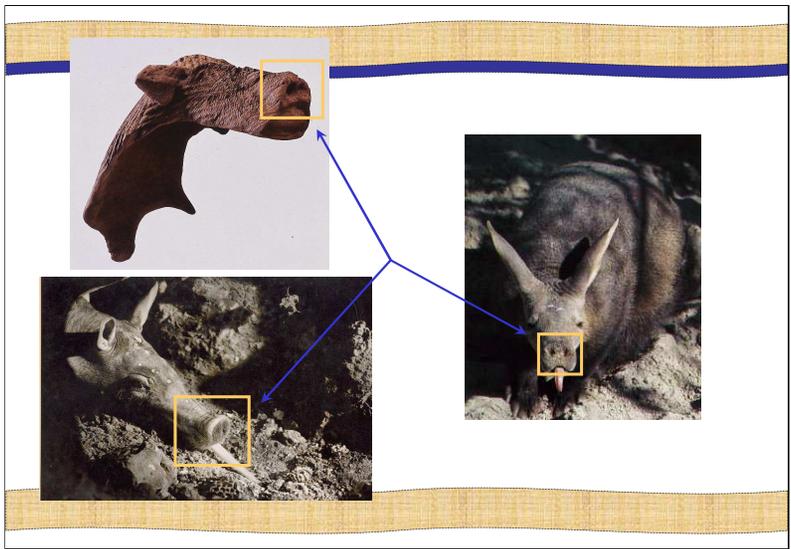
Archaeological evidence

- *Oryctéropus afer* (=aardvark) remains have been identified from archaeological sites through Southern Africa in most periods over the past 30,000 years. (Plug & Badenhorst, 2001).
- Also depicted in rock art.
- Indications that it may have been of ritual importance in some Iron Age communities. (Plug & Badenhorst, 2001).
- The Liavela wooden sculpture (Angola).



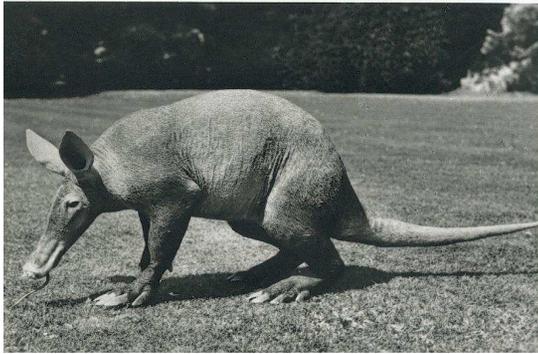
Dated:
Cal. AD750-850





Aardvark:

- Nocturnal
- Lives underground
- Strange appearance
Does not resemble any other living mammal but sometimes likened to **a pig**: body, skin, snout, grunt (aardvark)
or
to **a human**: single offspring, solitary, skin scantily covered with bristly hair, may sit up kangaroo-like.
- Very powerful : an “African Bulldozer”



Aardvark symbolism in sub-Saharan Africa

- Animals are symbolic not when they make good food, but when they make good food for thought « bon à penser ». (Lévi-Strauss)
- Pangolin: contradicts the most obvious animal categories
- Aardvark in the same family
- A challenge to folk taxonomy

Symbolic aspects of the aardvark among the:

Lele: a spirit, member of the pangolin « family », both dig in the earth.

Bambara: also same family as of the pangolin, dig in the earth like the pangolin and the cultivator, human like, hard worker, powerful

Sexuality and fertility: posture when digging similar to the agriculturalist hoeing and a man making love.

Its arching back is the canopy

Nyanja: the aardvark catches the sun in his burrow, agriculturalist

Rwanda: brave agriculturalist

Tshokwe: assimilated to the lion and the leopard, animals symbolizing the chief.

Rukuba: like the chief, major role as mediator.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, aardvark linked to		In Egypt, Seth linked to
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Night / day / sun	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Underworld / death	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Chief, king	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Sexuality	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Very strong	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Powerful of forefoot	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Human like	<input type="checkbox"/> ?
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Arching back is canopy	(<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>) son of Nout
<input type="checkbox"/>	Linked with pig	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Linked with donkey	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Beer, drunkard	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Open / closed	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Omnivorous voracious	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Disorder, confusion, trickster	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

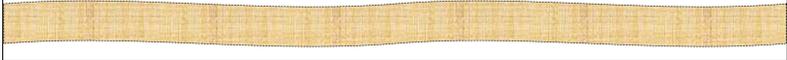
CONCLUSION

So ... the Seth animal is likely to be originally a true animal, although a trickster, a real monster whose characteristics provided good « food for thought » to both Africans and Early Egyptians.





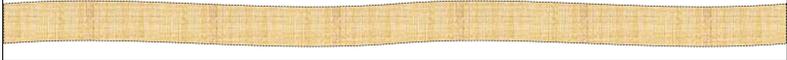
It is time to pay more attention
to the **integration** of Egyptology in Africa,
also from a symbolic perspective.





Ethnoarchaeology should also devote more
attention to the symbolic world.

There are many more surprises in store !





REFERENCES

de MARET P., L'oryctérope, un animal " bon à penser" pour les Africains est-il à l'origine du dieu égyptien Seth ?, *Bulletin de l'Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale*, 105, 2005, pp. 1-20.

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