

A Falcon-Headed Crocodile Hieroglyph: the Akhom-Entity Twice as Vigilant

Elsa ORÉAL

AOrOc, CNRS-ENS-PSL



Function
Classifier/Repeater

Value
[Akhom]

The noun ‘*ḥm*/‘*šm*/‘*ḥm*, when referring to supra-human entities playing a role in the divine world, is usually written with a falcon or a crocodile figure as classifier. It has been proposed that both animals share a feature perceived as salient by the Egyptians: their eyes, making them considered as prototypically ‘vigilant’ creatures, a meaning that fits the oldest uses of the corresponding verb (Oréal 2023). A hieroglyph combining a crocodile body with a falcon head thus unites two potential classifiers in one. Beyond the graphic play, the resulting figure has a theological meaning. The god Khonsu-Shu is known for his composite form as a falcon-headed crocodile, which is attested in the temple of Khonsu at Karnak (Traunecker 1982: 348–349) and in the Hibis temple (Davies 1953, pl. 2 V 7). There, its position lying over the Osirian shrine shows that he plays the role of an *akhom*, a watchful guardian joining the dead body in the Beyond. In the Opet temple inscription, this hitherto unrecognised graphic allusion to the specific form taken by the god thus hints at the well-known function of Khonsu-Shu as a protector bringing offerings to the dead ancestors during his daily journey to the West bank of the Nile (Herbin 1994, 145–146, Klotz 2012: 101–109). The lunar dimension may also play a role in the association of Khonsu-Shu to the notion of ‘*ḥm*’, since the nocturnal sun may also be referred to as a vigilant (falcon) in the night boat (Betrò 1990: 67–68). In a scene on the portal of Evergetes, the same noun ‘*ḥm*’ associated to Khonsu-Shu shows a simple crocodile (IA5) as classifier (fig. 1), so that the comparison allows us to clearly distinguish the difference with our falcon-headed crocodile, whose silhouette strongly recalls three-dimensional representations of the same composite animal.



Fig. 1

References:

Betrò, M.C. 1989. *Saqqara III. I Testi solari del portale di Pascerientaisu (BN2)*, Supplemento a Egitto e Vicino Oriente. Pisa, Giardini.

Davies, N. de G. 1953. *The Temple of Hibis in el Khargeh Oasis, III. The Decoration*, Publications of The Metropolitan Museum of Art Egyptian Expedition 17. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Herbin, Fr.-R. 1994. *Le Livre de parcourir l'éternité*, Orientalia Lovaniensia analecta 58. Leuven, Peeters.

Klotz, D. 2012. *Caesar in the City of Amun: Egyptian Temple Construction and Theology in Roman Thebes*, Monographies Reine Élisabeth 15. Turnhout, Brepols.

Oréal, E. 2023. "Achom le vigilant. Nommer l'animal, penser le divin," *Revue d'égyptologie* 73: 81–102.

Traunecker, C. 1982. "Un exemple de rite de substitution : une stèle de Nectanebo I^{er}," *Cahiers de Karnak* 7: 339–354.


Document: Offering scene (Opet 23) – (KIU 4288)

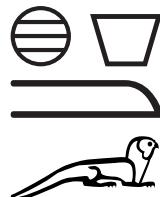
Date: Ptolemaic, reign of Ptolemy XII Neos Dionysos (in two phases between 80–51 BCE)

Provenance: Opet temple, Karnak

Current location: *In situ*

Object type: Wall

Material: Sandstone

Hieroglyphic source


MdC: W10*Aa1:Aa15:G11

Transliteration: 'ḥm

Translation: akhom, "one who is vigilant"

Location: Karnak, Opet temple, offering scene (Opet 23–KIU 4288)