

**THE SERPENT MYTHS OF  
ANCIENT EGYPT:  
BEING A COMPARATIVE  
HISTORY OF THESE MYTHS**

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The Serpent Myths of Ancient Egypt: Being a Comparative History of These Myths by W. R. Cooper

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**W. R. COOPER**

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THE  
**Serpent Myths of Ancient Egypt.**

BEING

**A COMPARATIVE HISTORY OF THESE MYTHS**

COMPILED FROM

THE "RITUAL OF THE DEAD," EGYPTIAN INSCRIPTIONS, PAPYRI, AND  
MONUMENTS IN THE BRITISH AND CONTINENTAL MUSEUMS.

By **W. R. COOPER, F.R.S.L.,**

HON. SEC. SOC. BIB. ARCHÆOLOGY.

*With Notes and Remarks by Dr. S. BIRCH, M. RENGUÉ, M. LENORMANT,  
S. M. DEACH, Esq., and other Egyptologists.*

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Being a Paper read before the Victoria Institute,  
or, Philosophical Society of Great Britain, 8, Adelphi Terrace, Strand.  
(*With the Discussion.*)

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Shrine of the great deity Amun-Ra, with the goddesses Mersekar and Elloithya in the form of snakes on either side of the door. Above are the solar disk and the usual cornice of everliving urai. (Leyden Museum.)



OBSERVATIONS ON THE SERPENT MYTHS OF  
ANCIENT EGYPT.\* *Illustrated with Explanatory  
Figures from Egyptian Monuments and Ancient Gems. By  
W. R. COOPER, Esq., F.R.S.L., Secretary of the Society  
of Biblical Archaeology.*

WHILE much has been done for the elucidation of the Ophiolatry of India, Greece, and Rome by many most able scholars, yet the serpent myths of Egypt,—the oldest, most abundant, and best preserved of them all, have been but little attended to since the time of Champollion and Wilkinson. On the Continent it is true that MM. Pierret, Brugsch, and Lenormant† have published a few isolated papers upon parts of the legends of hieroglyphy, but these have never been translated into English, and even the originals are but little known. This is both a subject of regret and of surprise, for no one who considers the very early connection between Egypt and Israel in Biblical times can fail to have noticed that there were many allusions and restrictions in the ceremonial laws of the latter nation, which only by a reference to the customs of their contemporary neighbours could be duly understood. While the Romans doubted, and the Greeks ridiculed, their gods, the nobler and more primitive Egyptians loved, and were supposed to be beloved, by them. The profane and the impure divinities of the Grecian Olympus, the debaucheries of Silenus and of Pan, the fraudulent Mercury, and the unchaste Venus, find no counterpart in the Egyptian Pantheon. Not till the irruption of the semi-greek Psammetici does Theban worship become obscene, and Theban sculpture gratuitously indecent; and it may be safely asserted, without fear of contradiction, that there is, morally and scientifically, more to disgust in the *Odes* of Horace or *The Days and Weeks* of Hesiod, than in the whole vast range of ancient Egyptian literature.

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\* Those aware of some of the tendencies of modern thought will recognize the value of this paper. Since it was read the author has kindly taken the opportunity of adding such new matter as the most recent investigations on the subject afford, in order that it might be as complete a statement of the serpent myths of ancient Egypt as could be at present published. The engravings have been carefully done on the graphotype process by Mr. John Allen.—Ed.

† Mostly in the *Revue Archéologique*, of Paris, and the *Zeitschrift für Ägyptische Sprache*, of Berlin. England as yet possesses no journal wholly devoted to exegetical archaeology.

2. The danger of Egyptian theology was not in its innate impurity, but its extremely speculative character, its endless subtleties and misunderstood symbolism, its fetish amulets, and degrading animal idolatry. In these it was, to a great extent, imitated by the Jews, whom, despite the precautions of the divine lawgiver, it corrupted, while by associating with the visible agencies of good and evil the ideas of invisible and supernatural power, the hieroglyphs, as more or less all symbolists eventually do, obscured the antitypes they intended to typify, and overloaded their imperfectly significant faith by a still less significant system of representation. These errors the pride and subtlety of the hierarchy permitted the common orders to fall into by the division of their dogmatic teaching into an exoteric, and esoteric, meaning,—one for the people and another for themselves,—and then, after a time, avarice and statecraft usurping the place of principle, the bulk of the Egyptians were left to follow their own interpretations of their symbolic statuary, while the secret beauty of the Theoretic faith was reserved for the hierophants alone.

3. Foremost among all the natural objects first associated as representatives, and then as hypostases, of the Deity, were the sun and the heavenly bodies; the sun as Chefer- and Horus-Ra (fig. 1), the moon as Isis, the heavens as Neith; and upon earth

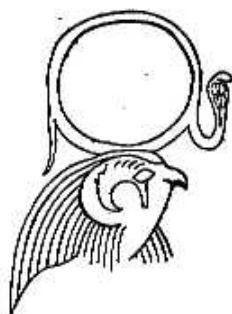


Fig. 1. Horus-Ra, wearing the solar disk and uræus. (Arundale.)

the benevolent and fertilizing Nile as the deity Hapimou, or a form of Khem, father of the land of Egypt. The sanctification of beasts, birds, and reptiles followed—some for their beauty, others for their utility; then a spirit of fear led on the way to the propitiation of destructive agencies and injurious animals—the storm, the east wind, the lightning, in the first class, and the hippopotamus, the crocodile, and the SERPENT, in the other,—till, in the end, after centuries of superstition and de-



cadence, the adoration, vocative and precativè, of this latter reptile spread throughout the whole of the Egyptian mythology, and the serpent lay enshrined in the temples of the oldest and most beneficent divinities.

4. From the very earliest period to which our researches are enabled to extend, there is written and monumental evidence that out of three kinds of serpents, known in Egypt and represented on the monuments, two were the objects of a peculiar veneration and of an almost universal worship. Unlike the adoration of Seb (fig. 2), the crocodile deity of Ombos and



Fig. 2. The deity Sebek wearing the Teshu or great plume of Osiris. (Bunsen.)

Tentyra,\* and the batrochocephalan deity, Pthah, the frog-headed fire-god of Memphis in the Delta, the reverence paid to the snake was not merely local or even limited to one period of history, but it prevailed alike in every district of the Pharian empire, and has left its indelible impress upon the architecture and the archæology of both Upper and Lower Egypt.

5. The three serpents peculiar then to Egypt and North Africa appear to have been: 1. The Naja, or Cobra di Capello, the



Fig. 3. The Sacred Uraeus or Basilisk. (Sir. Oimen.)

spectacle-snake of the Portuguese and the Uraeus† (fig. 3) and basilisk of the Greeks; a venomous and magnificent reptile, with

\* Champollion (le Jeune), *Pantheon Égyptien*.

† Uraeus, Gr. = Ouro = arau, in hieroglyphics, the letters composing the determinative of king.

prominent eyes, ringed skin, and inflated breast. From its dangerous beauty, and in consequence of ancient tradition asserting it to have been spontaneously produced by the rays of the sun,\*



Fig. 4. The solar disk encircled by an uræus wearing the Pschent. this creature was universally assumed as the emblem of divine and sacro-regal sovereignty.† 2. The Asp, or Cerastes (fig. 5),



Fig. 5. The Cerastes. (Bonomi, *Hieroglyphics*.)

a small and deadly kind of viper, possibly the cockatrice of Holy Writ,‡ remarkable for its short thick body, and blunt and flattened head, crested with scaly horns. 3. A large and unidentified species of coluber, of great strength and hideous longitude.

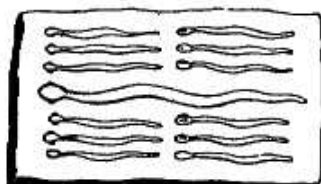


Fig. 6. Limestone tablet in the British Museum, possibly representing the generation of the months.

This last was, even from the earliest ages, associated as the representative of spiritual, and occasionally physical evil, and

\* Hence the reptile is termed, on an ancient papyrus, "Soul of the body of Ra."

† The King or Pharaoh is hieroglyphically represented by a basilisk (uræus) encircling the solar orb alone, as on the great gates of El-Luxor. (Fig. 4.)

Deane, an unsafe authority, asserts that death by the sting of an uræus was supposed to insure an immortal life to the victim; hence the peculiar fitness of the death of Cleopatra.

‡ There is a curious block at the British Museum, representing one large viper (distinguished from those commonly drawn by an extremely large head) between twelve smaller ones. The reptile is wrought in soft stone, of ancient Egyptian work, and is unintelligible as to the mythos represented, there being no hieroglyphics. (Fig. 6.)

was named Hof, Rehof, or APOPHIS (fig. 7), "the *destroyer*, the *enemy of the gods*,\* and the *devourer of the souls of men*." That such a creature once inhabited the Libyan desert, we have the

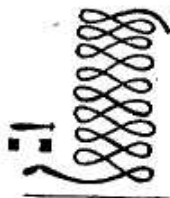


Fig. 7. Apophis, the *destroyer*. The hieroglyphics above his head compose the letters of his name, A—P—P.

testimony both of Hanno the Carthaginian† and Lucan the Roman;‡ and if it is now no longer an inhabitant of that region, it is probably owing to the advance of civilization having driven it further south.

6. With one or other of these snakes all the ideographic theology of Egypt is involved. Does the king desire to



Fig. 8. Thothmes III. wearing the sacred crown of Osiris; beneath it, and above the claft or plaited head-dress, is fixed the jewelled uræus.

declare his divine authority, he assumes the sacred asp of Amun-Ra (fig. 8), and wears the basilisk upon his crown. The

\* From Hof or Hf is derived the Coptic name of a snake to this day.

† See *Periplus*, Cory's translation.

‡ First of those plagues the drowsy asp appeared, (Cerastes.)  
Then first her crest and swelling neck she reared;  
A larger drop of black congealing blood  
Distinguished her amidst the deadly brood;  
Of all the serpent race are none so fell,  
None with so many deaths such plenteous venoms swell. . . .  
Her scaly fold th' Hæmorrhoids unbends, (Apophis ?)