

Destruction of Enemies: an Unpublished Plaque of Seth and Apep in the Petrie Museum, London¹

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Abstract

An unpublished plaque of limestone was preserved in the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, UCL (LDUCE-UC16661). It was figured with Seth and Apep bound together as enemies at a stake. The research aims to study this plaque and investigate its known parallel, denoting its function.

Keywords: Seth, Apep, Wax, Late Period, Plaque, Khoiak festival

Introduction

This article publishes a limestone plaque in the collections of the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, UCL (LDUCE-UC16661), bearing images of Seth² and Apep³ bound together as enemies at a stake (Figures 1-3). Provisionally it has been dated to the Late Period to the Ptolemaic Period, on general iconographic and stylistic grounds. My intention here is to assess its date and ritual significance as precisely as possible.

It has no documented archaeological provenance, and may therefore have entered the collection from any of the following three main sources in the history of the Petrie Museum:

1. Excavation by Flinders Petrie, his contemporaries, and successors (the excavated portion of the Museum collections derive mainly from the excavations directed by Petrie himself or funded by his Egyptian Research Account)
2. Purchase by Flinders Petrie during his seasons in Egypt 1880-1914 and 1919-1924 (an estimated 30,000 of the 80,000 objects in the Petrie Museum derive from his purchases in Egypt and England for his typological teaching and research collection);
3. Acquisition by gift, request or donation from another source (a smaller proportion of the collection).

Description

H: 4.4 cm

W: 6.1 cm

Thickness:

Side top: 1.2 cm

Side bottom: 1.6 cm

Side right: 1.5 cm

Side left: 1.4 cm

Maximum thickness: 2 cm

¹ I would like to thank Professor Stephen Quirke, Institute of Archaeology, UCL, UK for his effort revising this article and giving his valuable notes; Thanks due to Dr. Gianluca Minci, Associate Professor, Department of Civilization and Forms of Knowledge, University of Pisa, Italy for the professional photographs of the object at inside UCL

² On Apep see: Hornung, Erik and Alexander Badawy, "Apophis", in: LÄ I, cols.350-352

³ For more information about Seth see: Herman te Velde "Seth" in: LÄ V, pp.908 col 2-911 col 1

Depth of relief figures max: 0.2 cm

Material: limestone

Condition: Upper and lower left corners of decorated face broken away

Decoration of the main face: sharply defined low relief image of a bearded man (left) and Seth-headed man (right) (snout more like donkey muzzle, ears more like Seth animal with flat-topped ears), both kneeling with arms behind bound to a central v-topped stake, with their names written above the heads. Hand of each figure downward with downward thumb; hieroglyphic inscriptions above figures, left *'pp* "Aapep"⁴, right *stš* "Seth"⁵; in front of each figure a dagger-like pair of crossed lines, that on the left more roughly cut. The signs might evoke fire, as the destruction of the enemies in the book of Gates take place by burning⁶, or cutting, as other pictorial sources represent Seth as an ass being stabbed or clubbed to death (see discussion below)⁷.

Undecorated faces: the sides are sawn to an even surface, and the underside is more roughly finished.

Parallels

Georges Michailides published an inscribed plaque similar in material, size, motif and technique, with no information on provenance (Figure 4)⁸. The surface seems abraded, with a small area lost at the corner to the lower left of the figures. The plaque is squarer than the Petrie Museum example; the figures occupy a smaller area and are more upright; there is one vertical line of cursively incised hieroglyphic inscription to the left and right. At each side of a central v-topped stake is a figure with flexed arms and legs as if bound to the stake. The figure at the left has tapering ears, more like a donkey than the Seth animal. The figure at right seems to have long hair or headgear, separate from the neck and shoulder; a triangular protrusion at shoulder-height at right may indicate a beard, but this is unclear. The left line of the inscription is indistinct but seems to include one diagonal and one crossed diagonally. The line at the right may start with a name *bbn* with determinative of crossed diagonal, followed by the disk and horizontal line with diagonal, and disk and horizontal line with crossed (?) diagonal; these groups with diagonals perhaps present the phrase “enemy of Ra”⁹.

Dimensions as published: “5 cm.5 x 5.5cm”

The Petrie Museum collection includes a pottery stamp-seal (?) with a similar representation (collection no. LDUCE-UC59473), which Petrie interpreted in ethnic terms as “Libyan and Asiatic captives bound to a stake”¹⁰ (Figure 5). The object is roughly finished, with a wide perforation for stringing through the shallow-domed upper side. The oval underside bears a

⁴ For the names and titles of Apep cf. LGG II, p. 72_B – 75_A; Ludwig D. Morenz, “On the Origin, Name, and Nature of an Ancient Egyptian Anti-God”, in: JNES, vol 63, Chicago July 2004, pp. 202

⁵ For the variant names and titles including Seth cf. LGG VI, p. 691_B – 698_A

⁶ Jan Zandee, Death as an Enemy According to Ancient Egyptian Conceptions, Translated by Mrs W. F. Klasens, Leiden 1960, pp. 15-16

⁷ Samuel A. B. Mercer, Horus Royal God of Egypt, Massachusetts1942, p.64

⁸ Michailides, Georges, “Éléments de synthèse religieuse gréco-égyptienne”, BIFAO 66, 1968, p. 82

⁹ Quack, Joachim Friedrich, “Ein altägyptisches Sprachtabu”, Lingua Aegyptia 3, 1993, 60-61 with n.22; Prada, Luigi, “Divining grammar and defining foes: linguistic patterns of Demotic divinatory handbooks (with special reference to P. Cairo CG 50138-41) and a note on the euphemistic use of *xft* “enemy”.”, in Jasnow, Richard and Ghislaine Widmer (eds), Illuminating Osiris: Egyptological studies in honor of Mark Smith, Atlanta: Lockwood Press, 2017, pp. 277-301

¹⁰ William Matthew Flinders Petrie, Objects of Daily Use, 69, pl. LX.189

raised relief motif of back-to-back bound captives, that on the right with bearded human head, that on the left with Sethian head. Again, there is no documented provenance; the museum database suggests a general date of “(possible) Late Period”.

Height: 7.8cm; width: 4.5 cm; maximum height of raised relief figures: 0.2

Analysis

The motif and inscriptions on the plaque evoke and re-enact the punishment of Seth and Apep together as evil deities and enemies to the gods (Osiris and Re). In the Book of Gates, the unjust, who are punished, are those who sinned on earth against Re or Osiris. Accordingly, the execution of Seth as opponent of Osiris and of Apophis as enemy of Re are equated with the punishments of sinners¹¹. On a cosmic level, then, both may represent the forces of disorder in the universe, as in the examples of defeating chaos by stabbing Seth during the Khoiak festival (Figures 6-7)¹², or by felling Apep in order to control the river waters, as vividly described in the Coffin Texts fish-trap spell 473¹³.

Equally the motif could symbolize a political view, expressing the defeat of the foreign enemies of Egypt (compare the Petrie interpretation above with n.5).¹⁴ Potentially the image might also have been used in the judicial context of punishing a person who had committed a sacrilegious crime; without mentioning the personal name, the offender would be identified with the name of the enemy of Re or Osiris.¹⁵

The iconography thus evokes at the same time the world of the gods and the world of humans, in a combination of religious, political, moral and legal dimensions. Enemies of the creator are represented with their arms tied behind their backs¹⁶. Captive enemies of the king used to be displayed in the same manner¹⁷. In the Book of Gates, at the 5th gate, 5th and 6th registers, foreign peoples are represented kneeling and bound, to render them powerless against the sun-god on his night journey¹⁸.

Function

Egyptian representations of bound prisoners or captives are known already in predynastic times¹⁹. Robert Ritner has noted the distinction between the pictorial evidence and the written evidence, whether accompanying captions or related rituals with or without illustrations. Whereas the bound captive motif presents a figure apparently inert, the material figurines themselves were evidently activated in cursing rituals, most clearly in the Old and Middle

¹¹ Jan Zandee, op cit, pp. 6-7

¹² Harco Willems, “Crime, Cult and Capital Punishment (Mo'alla Inscription 8)”, in: *JEA* 76, p.45

¹³ *Coffin Texts VI*, I6a-d [473]

¹⁴ Sethe, Kurt Übersetzung und Kommentar zu den altägyptischen Pyramidentexten, I, Gluckstadt, 1935, pp.205-206.

¹⁵ Harco Willems, “Crime, Cult and Capital Punishment (Mo'alla Inscription 8)”, in: *JEA* 76, p.37; Posener, Georges, “Les criminals débaptisés et les morts sans noms”, *Revue d'Egyptologie* 5 (1946), 51-56; Ritner, Robert Kriech, The Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice, Studies of Ancient Oriental Civilization, No. 54, Chicago ,1993, pp.165 with n.771, 167 fig. 14g.

¹⁶ Jan Zandee, op cit, p.20

¹⁷ Emma Swan Hall, The Pharaoh Smites his Enemies: A Comparative Study, Berlin 1986, p.5

¹⁸ Jan Zandee, op cit, p.237

¹⁹ Ritner, Robert Kriech, The Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice, Studies of Ancient Oriental Civilization, No. 54, Chicago ,1993, p. 115

Kingdom "execration texts" written on pottery figures and bowls²⁰. The "execration texts" explicitly name their human targets so that, within the ritual context, the figurine becomes the absolute equivalent of the human body, as Ritner puts it "an Egyptian counterpart to the "voodoo doll""²¹. The most remarkable find of objects bearing "execration texts" is the set of late Middle Kingdom figurines found broken and buried in a desert deposit near the Egyptian fortress at Mirgissa, in the 2nd cataract region of Lower Nubia²².

With particular reference to a set of "spells against enemies" known from a single late 4th century BC papyrus, Ann-Katrin Gill has argued that the Old and Middle Kingdom "execration texts" relate directly to the extensive wider evidence for protective rituals preserved on Late Period to Roman Period papyri and temple reliefs²³. Among the instructions for rituals, Ritner noted the different forms of attack on the object embodying the enemy: demeaning (boiling in urine, spitting on it, trampling), harming (stabbing), and destroying (crushing, burning)²⁴. For repeated acts of burning, wax offered an ideal raw material, as it is malleable and combustible. In one frequently copied funerary composition, Book of the Dead chapter 7 has the title "formula for passing the difficult sandbank of Apophis", and starts with the exclamation "O sole one of wax"²⁵, presumably addressing a wax figure to be destroyed. Similarly, the Late Period composition known as the Apophis Book²⁶ prescribes the incineration of wax figures of enemies. Ritner draws a convincing connection between the presence of small-scale crucibles in the Middle Kingdom Mirgissa execration deposit and the Apophis Book instruction, "Fell with the spear or knife, place on the fire in the furnace of the coppersmiths"²⁷.

In such settings, the act of burning evidently conveys the destruction or execution. As with any action, a different context can change the effect; melting wax in another context might be used to soften the hard-hearted, as in some Hellenistic and Roman contexts²⁸. However, the names of Seth and Apophis on the plaque and their widespread attestations in rites of protection confirm the primary function as destructive. Ritner lists an impressive range of relevant rituals at different locations, from the purification of the Heliopolis sanctuary entered by king Piye at his conquest of Egypt, to the festivals of Horus at Edfu and the protection of the *neshmet*-boat of Osiris²⁹. As he notes, the protective rites against Apophis included daily as well as seasonal or annual rites; moreover, rituals such as the Apophis Book survive because some papyri were transferred from temple use to serve as protection instead for personal use in the afterlife. A Late Period ritual

²⁰ Muhlestein, Kerry, Execration Rituals, in: Jacco Dieleman and Willeke Wendrich (eds.), UCLA Encyclopedia of Egyptology, Los Angeles, 2008 <http://digital2.library.ucla.edu/viewItem.do?ark=21198/zz000s3mqr>

²¹ Ritner, Robert Kriech, Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice, pp.136-137

²² *Ibid*, p. 154

²³ Ann-Katrin Gill, "The Spells against Enemies in the papyrus of Pawerem (P. BM EA 10252): a preliminary report", in: Backes, Burkhard and Jacco Dieleman (eds), *Liturgical texts for Osiris and the deceased in Late Period and Greco-Roman Egypt / Liturgische Texte für Osiris und Verstorbene im spätzeitlichen Ägypten: proceedings of the colloquiums at New York (ISAW), 6 May 2011, and Freudenstadt, 18-21 July 2012*. Studien zur spätägyptischen Religion 14. Wiesbaden, 2015, pp. 133-144

²⁴ Ritner, Robert Kriech, op cit, p. 150

²⁵ Theis, Christoffer, Magie und Raum: der magische Schutz ausgewählter Räume im Alten Ägypten nebst einem Vergleich zu angrenzenden Kulturbereichen, Tübingen, 2014, p. 131

²⁶ Goyon, Jean-Claude, "Apophisbuch", in LÄ, vol.1, cols. 354-355

²⁷ *Ibid*, p.158 with n.726 citing Apophis Book column 26, line 4

²⁸ C. A. Faraone, "Clay Hardens and Wax Melts: Magical Role-Reversal in Vergil's Eighth Eclogue", in: *Classical Philology* 84, No. 4 (Oct., 1989) Chicago, p.294. Cf. Ritner, Robert Kriech, op cit., pp.176-180, emphasising the consistency of the aim in both destruction and affection, as "control over the emotions and actions of the victim"

²⁹ Ritner, Robert Kriech, op cit, pp.207-209

with the title the “end of the work (of embalming)” provided instructions for installing a “House of Life” to shelter Osiris images made in the Khoiak festival; depictions of four braziers, one topped with flame hieroglyphs, enclose bound enemy figures of a Seth-headed and a bearded man, drawn in red, and strikingly similar to the motif on the Petrie Museum plaque (Figure 8)³⁰. An inscription in red around the pair of figures reads “the enemy, the enemy in the *des-jar* of the vile; the enemy, the enemy, the vile Seth and his confederates”.

In relation to the limestone plaque in the Petrie Museum and its parallels, it should be noted that the exact function is difficult to identify. The question is made more difficult by the lack of information on provenance for the Petrie Museum plaque and its closest parallel (above). However, one comparable object is recorded as coming from Edfu: a limestone plaque 4.8 by 5 cm, and 2.8-3cm thick (Egyptian Museum Cairo JE43014) (Figure 9). It bears two motifs; on one side a donkey-headed human figure with arms tied at the back, but without a stake, and on the other side a turtle³¹. The Edfu plaque was unearthed by sebakhin, and Ritner sees such finds as direct evidence for rites of burial rather than burning³². There is a further possibility worth considering; a limestone plaque might be used as a model for producing moulds to cast wax figures. Such a procedure is known from the use of moulds in the “lost wax” process of casting metal objects³³, though in that case the aim is to produce a new object in another material, rather than to annihilate a being. However, it is unclear whether such shallow relief as that on the Petrie Museum plaque could produce figures for burning in a ritual.

Conclusion

From the above exploration of the plaque with its motifs in shallow relief, its function and precise date seem likely to remain uncertain, until closer parallels can be found among provenanced finds. Even the authenticity of the Petrie Museum plaque and its two closest parallels must remain open to question; authentication would require detailed comparative analysis with sunk relief carving on Late Period limestone artefacts. As a provisional assessment, it may be stated that the plaques themselves were not made to be destroyed in a ritual, because the extent of damage seems limited to abrasion or chipping. Such minor surface loss might result from either ritual acts to demean the figures (cutting or scraping the surface), or it could just represent damage in the ground after deposition. Ritual burial of the plaque itself is also a possibility, for which evidence might be sought in the written instructions for other items in rites of protection. Similarly, a possible use of plaques to make wax images for incineration in such rites needs to be assessed through future technical analyses and experimental archaeology. It is hoped that this first publication of the Petrie Museum plaque may stimulate these and other lines of research, and draw attention to further examples in museum collections and excavation stores.³⁴

³⁰ Ritner, Robert Kriech, op cit, pp.176, 177 fig.16a, collated from the online British Museum photograph of the papyrus (British Museum 10090+10051), first edition Philippe Derchain, *Le papyrus Salt 825 (B.M. 10051)*, Brussels, 1965, adding François-René Herbin, “Les premières pages du papyrus Salt 825”, *BIFAO* 88. On the contents of the manuscript, and its redating to the early 26th Dynasty by Ursula Verhoeven, see Theis, Christoffer, *Magie und Raum*, p.128

³¹ Ritner, Robert Kriech, op cit, p. 150

³² Daressy, Georges, “Pierre-talisman d’Edfou”, *ASAE* 12, 1912, pp.143-144

³³ Ritner, Robert Kriech, op cit, p. 210

³⁴ Sidney Smith, “An Egyptian Wax Figure and Other Antiquities”, in: *The British Museum Quarterly* 9, No. 3 (Feb., 1935), London, p.93

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Figures

Figure 1: Plaque of Seth and Apep, Petrie Museum, London no. LDUCE-UC1666
Photograph by Gianluca Minci



Figure 2: Facsimile of Plaque of Seth and Apep above, Petrie Museum LDUCE-UC16661

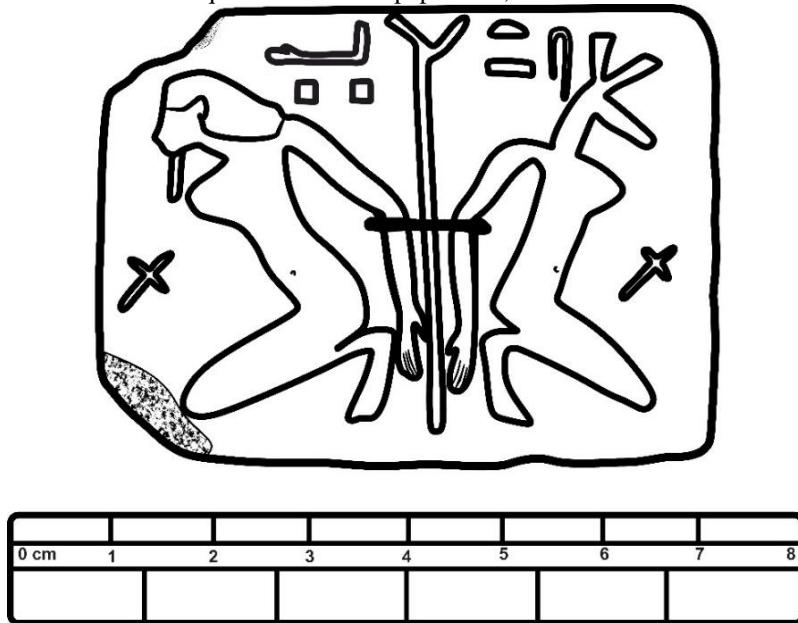


Figure 3: All Sides of the Plaque of Seth and Apep, Petrie Museum LDUCE-UC16661
Photographs by Gianluca Miniaci



Figure 4: Plaque with Seth and prisoner bound to similar stake
After: Michälides, Georges, 'Éléments de synthèse religieuse gréco-égyptienne', BIFAO 66, 1968, p.82, fig 9



Figure 5: Pottery stamp-seal (?), back roughly finished, oval underside with raised relief motif of back-to-back bound captives, that on the left with Seth head, Petrie Museum LDUCE-UC59473
UCL Petrie Museum Online Catalogue: <https://collections.ucl.ac.uk>



Figure 6: Donkey-headed Seth bound at v-topped stake between Horus and Osiris, illustration for tenth hour of Khoiak mystery, Dendera
After: Mariette 1873, pl.56a

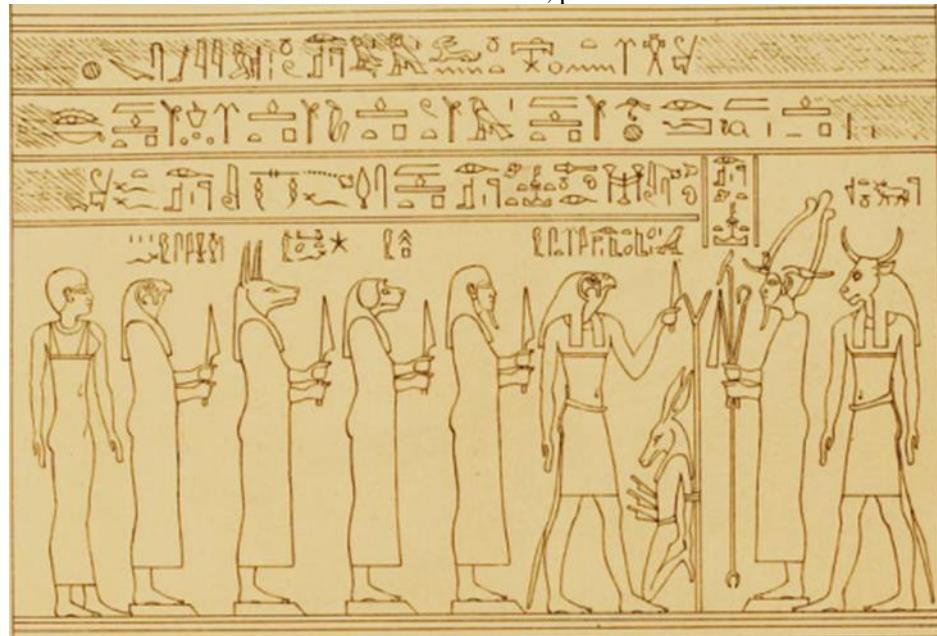


Figure 7: Detail of the above figure

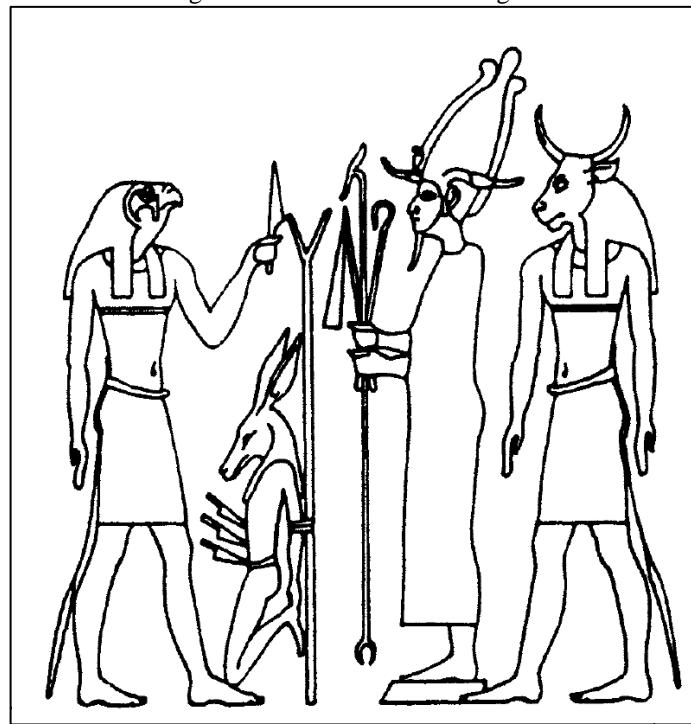


Figure 8: Vignette showing the incineration of Seth and a bearded man, bound together, in a rectangle identified in the accompanying inscription as “the *des-jar* of the vile”
After: Derchain, Philip, Le Papyrus Salt 825 (B.M. 10051). Brussels, 1965 p. 23, fig XIII a

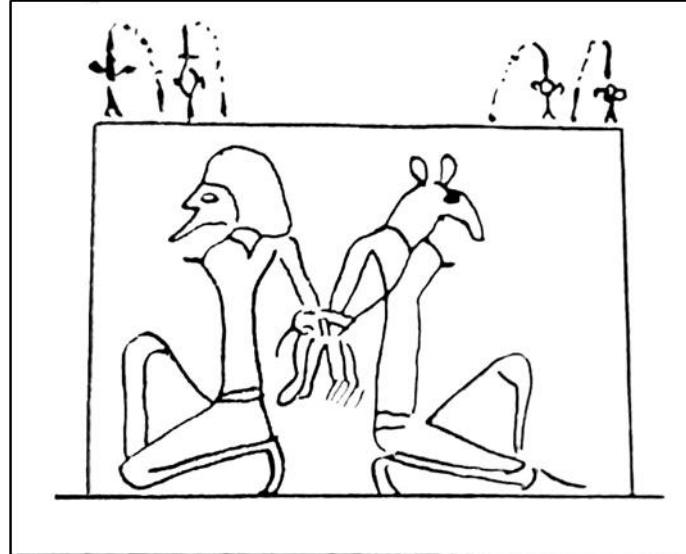


Figure 9: Details of a plaque in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo JdE 43014 found in Edfu representing kneeling bounded Seth
After: Daressy, Georges, ‘Pierre-talisman d’Edfou’, ASAE 12, 1912, pp.143, fig 2

