

Seth animal revisited

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The Seth animal – the subject of an ongoing debate

The ancient Egyptians gave their gods animal shapes or animal heads, a practice which was mistakenly despised by early Christian theologians as indicative of an animal cult, but in reality served as a code.¹ Seth, the god of chaos of all kinds,² received the form of an animal whose nature is still unclear today, and which is therefore necessarily named the "Seth animal".

In its oldest undoubted representations from the protodynastic era (Naqada IIIA/B), the Seth animal is dog-like with erect square-tipped ears, an elongated downward-curved snout and an erect tail (Fig. 1).³ Cylinder seal impressions on vessel closures from the tombs of kings of the 2nd dynasty show the Seth animal on top of the king's *serekh*. Next to the *serekh*, Seth sometimes stands with an anthropomorphic body and with the head of the Seth animal wearing the White Crown.⁴ This semi-anthropomorphic depiction of the god appears from the Old Kingdom onwards in numerous reliefs and a few preserved sculptures and amulets, whereby the headgear is usually a tripartite wig with or without the Double Crown, and the clothing is the royal kilt.⁵

¹ G. Englund, "Gods as a Frame of Reference: On Thinking and Concepts of Thought in Ancient Egypt", in G. Englund (ed.), *The Religion of the Ancient Egyptians: Cognitive Structures and Popular Expressions* (Uppsala, 1989), 7–27; F. Junge, "'Unser Land ist der Tempel der ganzen Welt': Über die Religion der Ägypter und ihre Struktur", in R. G. Kratz and H. Spieckermann (eds), *Polytheismus und Monotheismus in der Welt der Antike* (2nd edn; Tübingen, 2009), I, 6, 17.

² For a comprehensive overview, see e.g. H. Te Velde, *Seth, God of Confusion* (Leiden, 1967); I. R. Taylor, *Deconstructing the Iconography of Seth* (PhD thesis; University of Birmingham; Birmingham, 2016).

³ The ceremonial mace head and ivory tablets from the tomb U-j in Abydos, and rock art at Gebel Tjauti (approximately 3300–3100 BC) are considered unequivocal depictions of the Seth animal. J. C. Darnell, *Theban Desert Road Survey in the Egyptian Western Desert, Volume I: Gebel Tjauti Rock Inscriptions 1–45 and Wadi el-Hol Rock Inscriptions 1–45* (OIP 119; Chicago, 2002), pl. 12 (b); J. Kahl, "Die ältesten schriftlichen Belege für den Gott Seth", *GM* 181 (2001), 51–57; P. E. Newberry, "The Pig and the Cult-Animal of Set", *JEA* 14 (1928), pl. 18.

⁴ Newberry, *JEA* 14, 218 (figs 7, 9–11). However, the inscription refers to "Ash", a Libyan god.

⁵ Taylor, *Iconography*, 376 (pie chart 13.15); one of the few preserved statues is from Medinet Habu, now in the Egyptian Museum of Cairo, JE 31628.

The assumptions as to which natural animal is represented by the Seth animal are numerous and varied.⁶ The features found to be most enigmatic are the square-tipped ears.⁷ The most commonly named animals are from the order of even-toed ungulates: oryx, dromedary, giraffe, okapi and pig (wild boar or warthog). Of the perissodactyls, the ass and tapir were considered. The aardvark and the elephant shrew have been suggested because of their elongated snouts, and the desert jerboa⁸ because of its arrow-like tail. Even non-mammals such as a long-snouted fish (*Mormyrus longinostris*⁹) and a bird¹⁰ are among the candidates. The body shape suggests a canid (dog, fennec, jackal). However, the face of the Seth animal is anything but dog-like when compared to Anubis or to the numerous examples of dogs in hunting scenes. R. Lobban's (1999) suggestion that the face is a desiccated bull phallus seems rather bizarre.¹¹ Several authors came to the conclusion that it must be an extinct animal or a mythical creature.

⁶ A literature overview offers e.g. Newberry, *JEA* 14, 223–224, and A. S. Jensen, *The Sacred Animal of the God Set* (Biologiske Meddelelser 11/5, Copenhagen, 1934), 7–11.

⁷ Thilenius offered the explanation that this ear shape is intended to express that the tip of the auricle is not its highest point. G. Thilenius, *Das heilige Tier des Gottes Set* (RT 22; Paris 1900), 215.

⁸ Thilenius, *Das heilige Tier*, 217.

⁹ An obsolete name is *Mormyrus oxyrhynchus*.

¹⁰ In the Middle Kingdom, the snout of the Seth animal could be narrow and almost pointed, similar to a bird's beak. Taylor, *Iconography*, 351–353.

¹¹ A. McDonald, *Tall Tails: The Seth Animal Reconsidered* (BAR IS 909; Oxford, 2000), 75 n. 2, cited from R. Lobban, "A Solution to the Mystery of the Was Scepter of Ancient Egypt and Nubia", *KMT* 10 (1999), 68–77.



Fig. 1: Seth animal on a standard; mace head of the pre-dynastic king "Scorpion" from the tomb U-j in Abydos (Naqada IIIA1); photo from Newberry, *JEA* 14, pl. 18.

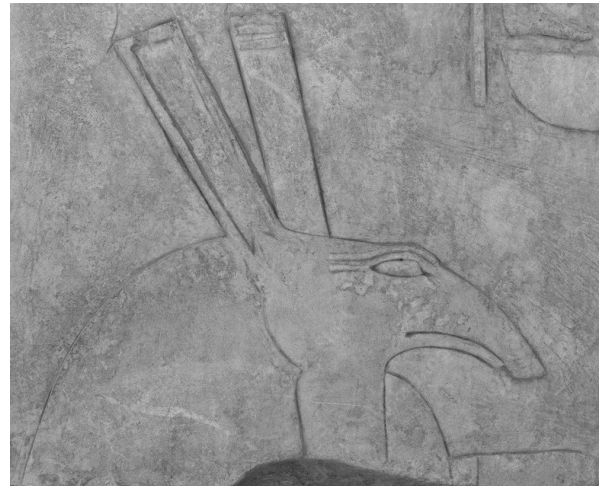


Fig. 2: Seth, detail from a relief on a limestone block fragment (18th dynasty), Karnak Open Air Museum; own photo.

On closer inspection of the proposed animals' snouts and nostrils, most of them can hardly be considered as models for the Seth animal, with the exception of the giraffes (giraffe, okapi) and the tapir. A. S. Jensen (1934) favoured the giraffe and interpreted the Seth animal's strikingly shaped ears as the two bony projections on the giraffe's forehead.¹² However, it would be completely untypical of the ancient Egyptians' attention to detail in animal depictions if the characteristic long neck had not been taken into account in the iconography of a god who was intended to have the shape of a giraffe.¹³ The okapi and the tapir are excluded due to their specific habitats.¹⁴

¹² Jensen, *Sacred Animal*, 10–16.

¹³ Already in the pre- and early dynastic eras, giraffes were depicted with lifelike necks, see e.g. D. Craig Patch, *Dawn of Egyptian Art* (London, New Haven, and New York, 2012), 58 (no. 57), 80 (no. 78), 139 (fig. 37a), 145 (no. 118), 149 (no. 123); F. D. Lankester, *Predynastic & Pharaonic Era Rock-Art in Egypt's Central Eastern Desert: Distribution, Dating & Interpretation* (PhD thesis, Durham University; Durham, 2012), 104 (figs. 4.18–4.30).

¹⁴ The okapi is adapted to the Central African rainforest at higher altitudes. R. E. Bodmer and G. B. Rabb, "Okapia johnstoni", *Mamm. Species* 422 (1992), 1–2. Since the Pleistocene, the tapir has only been native to South America and Southeast Asia. J. van der Made and I. Stefanovic, "A Small Tapir from the Turolian

The body of the Seth animal is undoubtedly that of a canid, although the tail raises questions. Until the early Old Kingdom, it had a normal, truncated or tufted end. In later examples, the tail end is mostly shaped like the feathered end of an arrow, so that the steeply erected tail resembles an arrow stuck in the hindquarters.¹⁵

New suggestion: The Seth animal is a composite creature combining dik-dik and hunting dog

The dik-dik is a species of antelope from the genus *Madoqua*. The “Günther’s dik-dik” (*Madoqua guentheri*, formerly “long-nosed dik-dik”) with its two subspecies (*M. guentheri guentheri*, *M. guentheri smithii*) occurs in Somalia, southern Ethiopia, northern and central Kenya, southeast South Sudan, and northeast Uganda.¹⁶ This small light to medium brown antelope (30–40 cm at the shoulder) is well adapted to heat and drought and lives in family groups in lowland areas of savannas and scrublands. In search of food, the crepuscular herbivores also venture close to human settlements and eat grain from the fields.¹⁷

At first glance, today’s distribution area of the dik-diks makes it doubtful that this animal played a role in the religious beliefs of the ancient Egyptians. However, the ecological conditions in pre-dynastic Egypt were different than today. A humid period in Northeast Africa from about 9000 to 5000 BC (“Green Sahara”) was followed by a phase of climatic instability until the hyper-arid conditions that continue to this day became established around 3000 BC.¹⁸ It is therefore justified to speculate that dik-diks were a familiar sight

of Kreka (Bosnia) and a Discussion on the Biogeography and Stratigraphy of the Neogene Tapirs”, *Neues Jahrb. Geol. Palaeontol. Abh.* 240 (2006), 207–240.

¹⁵ Taylor, *Iconography*, 324. Taylor assumed that the tail ends are modelled on military weapons from the respective period (ibid. 266–273). In Borchardt’s view it is always an arrow. L. Borchardt, “Das Settier mit dem Pfeil”, *GM* 46 (1909), 90–91.

¹⁶ Systematics of dik-diks: Family *Bovidae*, subfamily *Antilopinae*, genus *Madoqua*. The name “dik-dik” is onomatopoeic for its warning call.

¹⁷ Y. de Jong and T. M. Butynski, “Distributions in Uganda, Kenya, and North Tanzania of Members of the Günther’s Dik-dik *Madoqua (guentheri)* and Kirk’s Dik-dik (*M. kirkii*) Species Groups, Regions of Sympatry, Records of Aberrant-Coloured Individuals, and Comment on the Validity of Hodson’s Dik-dik *M. (g.) hodsoni*”, *Gnusletter* 34 (2017), 11–15; C. P. Groves, “Guenther’s Dik-dik *Madoqua guentheri*”, in D. E. Wilson and R. A. Mittermeier (eds), *Handbook of the Mammals of the World* (Barcelona, 2011), II, 655–656.

¹⁸ N. Brooks, “Cultural Responses to Aridity in the Middle Holocene and Increased Social Complexity”, *Quat. Int.* 151 (2006), 35–37; R. Kuper and S. Kroeplin 2006, “Climate-Controlled Holocene Occupation in the

to the herders of the savanna in what is now the western desert, and maybe even to the early settlers in the Nile Valley, until the dik-diks were displaced to more south-eastern habitats by the advancing desertification.¹⁹



Fig. 3: Adult male Günther's dik-dik at Ol ari Nyiro (Laikipia Nature Conservancy), Kenya. Photo by Mike Roberts <<https://www.wildsolutions.nl/photomaps/madoqua/>>, with kind permission.

Sahara: Motor of Africa's Evolution", *Science* 313 (2006), 805–807; K. Nicoll, "Recent Environmental Change and Prehistoric Human Activity in Egypt and Northern Sudan", *Quat. Sci. Rev.* 23 (2004), 565–575.

¹⁹ There are anecdotal reports of skeletal remains of dik-diks in Late Pleistocene or Holocene deposits in the Dakhleh Oasis and in Sudan (Nubia) near the Third Cataract. The relative sparsity of wild bovids' skeletal remains in Neolithic strata near human camp sites is attributed to hyenas feeding on bone debris. C. S. Churcher et al., "The Quaternary Faunas of Dakhleh Oasis, Western Desert of Egypt", in M. F. Wiseman (ed.), *The Oasis Papers 2: Proceedings of the Second International Conference of the Dakhleh Oasis Project* (Oxford, 2014), 16; J. L. Groth Akmenkalns, *Cultural Continuity and Change in the Wake of Ancient Nubian-Egyptian Interactions* (PhD thesis, University of California; Santa Barbara, 2018), 149, 183; S. Monroe, S. T. Smith, and S. B. McClure, "Pastoralism, Hunting, and Coexistence: Domesticated and Wild Bovids in Neolithic Sudan", *Int. J. Osteoarchaeol.* 33 (2023), 524 (tab. 3), cited from J. Kingdon, *East African Mammals: An Atlas of Evolution in Africa* (Chicago, 1982), III/C, 367–381; M. Osypińska and P. Osypiński, "Animal Exploitation and Behaviour of the Latest Middle Stone Age Societies in the Middle Nile Valley: Archaeozoological and Taphonomic Analysis of Late Pleistocene Fauna from the Affad Basin, Sudan", *Afr. Archaeol. Rev.* 33 (2016), 110 (fig. 3), 112–113, 117.



Fig. 4: Adult male Günther's dik-dik found dead (killed by a predator) at Parc national de Mago, Ethiopia. This somewhat sad photo is presented here because it clearly shows the length of the snout (compare to Seth in Fig. 2). Photo by Dominique Mignard
<https://mammiferesafricains.org/2015/12/dik-dik-de-gunther/>, with kind permission.

Günther's dik-diks have an interesting feature with regard to our question – an extension of the nose and upper lip into a downwardly curved snout that anatomically corresponds to a short trunk (proboscis). It is particularly long and mobile in males.²⁰ The length and shape of the trunk, the shape and position of the small nostrils and the contour of the forehead and nasal bone are well comparable to the corresponding details of the Seth animal (Figs. 3 and 4). Both sexes of the Günther's dik-dik have a preorbital gland, with the secretion of which they mark their territory. This gland appears as a black spot that, from a distance, looks as if it belongs to the eye (Fig. 3). This could explain why the front

²⁰ de Jong and Butynski, *Gnusletter* 34, 15.

corner of the Seth animal's eye is often noticeably elongated.²¹ In addition, the Günther's dik-dik's eyes are framed in white. There is a possible parallel for this in the Seth animal. On the mace head of the king "Scorpion", the eye of the Seth animal shows a circumferential line that is slightly offset from the edge of the eye, which might be the representation of the natural white frame (Fig. 1).²² The large, leaf-shaped ears of the Günther's dik-dik resemble the ear of the presumed early Seth figure (fragment of an ivory comb) from El-Mahasna.²³ The approximately 10 cm long, backwards-pointing horns of the dik-dik males are half-covered by a tuft of forehead hair and are hard to see from a distance. Therefore, it could be that the horns were considered not physiognomic and not worth depicting.²⁴

However, the long, delicate legs of the Günther's dik-dik with the paired hooves, and the stubby tail can hardly be associated with the Seth animal.²⁵ Instead, the body of the Seth animal usually resembles that of a slim, long-legged dog like a greyhound²⁶ or a saluki²⁷. These two dog breeds are believed to have been bred for hunting since prehistoric times in Mesopotamia and Egypt.²⁸ The Seth animal often wears the dog collar²⁹ with which hunting dogs³⁰ were almost always depicted.

Cropping the ears of hunting dogs is a tradition that goes back thousands of years in the countries of the Near and Middle East and North Africa. The extent of the procedure can range from cutting off the tips to removing more than two-thirds of the auricles. It is

²¹ Taylor, *Iconography*, 68 (figs 4.20–4.23), 109 (figs 7.7–7.9), 362 (no. 29).

²² In the later reliefs and sculptures, the Seth animal wears eye paint.

²³ E. R. Ayrton and W. L. S. Loat, *Pre-Dynastic Cemetery at El Mahasna* (MEEF 31; London, 1911), pl. 12.

²⁴ Only the fully anthropomorphic Seth in the iconography of Baal (Ramesside period) has two horns protruding from the front of his crown, albeit forward facing. A. Dodson and D. Hilton, *The Complete Royal Families of Ancient Egypt* (Cairo and London, 2004), 162; H. Sourouzian, *Monuments du roi Merenptah* (Mainz, 1989), pl. 7b; W. M. F. Petrie, *Researches in Sinai* (New York, 1906), pl. 134.

²⁵ But see the Seth animal determinative in the coffin text of B1P from el-Bershah in Taylor, *Iconography*, 56. In the Ptolemaic Period, the Seth animal can have pointed ears and hooves, commonly (mistakenly?) interpreted as an ass. Taylor, *Iconography*, 206 (figs 9.91, 9.92).

²⁶ As noted by Newberry, *JEA* 14, 217.

²⁷ K. Moss, "The Seth Animal: A Dog and Its Master", *AncEg* 10 (2009), 43.

²⁸ J. Brixhe, "Les chiens dans l'Égypte ancienne: Premier animal domestiqué, le chien est partout dans l'Égypte ancienne", *Pharaon* 21 (2015), 32; J. J. Mark, *Dogs in Ancient Egypt* (World History Encyclopedia; Surrey, 2017) <<https://www.worldhistory.org/article/1031/dogs-in-ancient-egypt/>> accessed 06.11.2023.

²⁹ Taylor, *Iconography*, 312 (pie chart 12.5).

³⁰ E.g. P. E. Newberry, *Beni Hasan* (London, 1893), I, pl. 30.

unclear whether this tradition originally had a practical, aesthetic or medical purpose.³¹ It is quite conceivable that cropping of dogs' ears was practised in Egypt early on, although probably only on the dogs of the elite. The ears of the two dogs of the "Two-Dog-Palette" from Hierakonpolis (Naqada IIIA)³² are low-triangular with an almost horizontal upper edge and thus resemble the ears of salukis when they are heavily cropped.³³ In hunting scenes, there is occasionally a dog with small lop ears or missing ears depicted next to the tomb owner.³⁴ The practice of ear cropping seems to have even been carried out on domestic dogs, at least in the New Kingdom (Fig. 5).³⁵ The horizontal ends of the Seth animal's ears would reflect the mildest version of cropping,³⁶ but the remaining auricles are upright and tend to be disproportionately high (Fig. 2). This is because the ancient Egyptians cared about expressing the essence or "idea" of reality, and its visual implementation could be rather striking.³⁷

In summary, the Seth animal has the face of a Günther's dik-dik and the body of a dog. The latter is identified as a hunting dog by its cropped ears, arrow-shaped tail and collar, if any. Following F. Junge's (2009) view, according to which the ancient Egyptian gods are personalised references to realities and events,³⁸ this union of hunting game and hunting dog in a composite creature was perhaps a figurative reference to archaic hunter groups.³⁹ These groups migrated during the fourth millennium BC from the last refuges in the former savanna (today's deserts) to the Nile Valley, where they presumably entered into

³¹ T. Clark, *The Ears of Syrian Salukis* <<https://desertbred.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Ears-on-Syrian-Salukis.pdf>> accessed 06.11.2023; M. Lehtonen, *Aavikkosaluki – mikä ja miksi?* <<http://www.qashani.com/aavikkosaluki.html>> accessed 06.11.2023.

³² Craig Patch, *Dawn*, 138–139 (fig. 37a).

³³ Clark, *Ears*, 2–3 (images).

³⁴ Tomb of Khnumhotep (Beni Hasan, 12th dynasty), in Newberry, *Beni Hasan*, I, pl. 30; tomb of Ineni (Thebes, 18th dynasty), facsimile on <<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/544557>> accessed 06.11.2023; Ostrakon, <<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/544076>> accessed 06.11.2023; Tutankhamun's box 21, in Taylor, *Iconography*, 269 (fig. 12.29). In contrast, the natural lop ears of salukis are long. Clark, *Ears*, 1; Moss, *Seth Animal*, 44.

³⁵ See for instance the ivory figurine in British Museum, EA13596, <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/Y_EA13596>, accessed 09.03.2024.

³⁶ Clark, *Ears*, 3 (top image); Moss, *Seth Animal*, 43.

³⁷ G. Robins, *Proportion and Style in Ancient Egyptian Art* (Austin, 1994), 1–21.

³⁸ Junge, in Kratz and Spieckermann (eds), *Polytheismus*, 17–23.

³⁹ In one of its oldest representations, the Seth animal appears on a standard, indicating a region or people (similar to the later Egyptian nomes). Newberry, *JEA* 14, pl. 18 (= fig. 1 in this work). See also the ceremonial "Hunters' Palette" (Naqada III) in Craig Patch, *Dawn*, 141–143 (no. 115).

territorial conflicts with agro-pastoral communities.⁴⁰ This scenario would explain a few things: Seth's association with the desert, destructive natural forces, turmoil and war;⁴¹ his depiction as an instructor in archery;⁴² his early worship near caravan routes (Nubt, Unu, Shashotep, Pimedjed, Piwayna);⁴³ the tabooisation of his name in the Pyramid Texts;⁴⁴ and certain aspects of the myth of Seth's fierce competition with Horus for supremacy in the Nile Valley.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Brooks, *Quat. Int.* 151, 37; U. Hartung, "Some remarks on a rock drawing from Gebel Tjauti", in K. Kroeper, M. Chłodnicki, and M. Kobusiewicz (eds), *Archaeology of Early Northeastern Africa: In Memory of Lech Krzyżaniak* (SAA 9; Poznań, 2006), 680–682; S. Hendickx, "Predynastic Period, Egypt", in R. S. Bagnall, et al. (eds), *The Encyclopedia of Ancient History* (London, 2013), 5514–5515; Kuper and Kroeplin, *Science* 313, 806 (fig. 3); Nicoll, *Quat. Sci. Rev.* 23, 572–573, 575.

⁴¹ Taylor, *Iconography*, 54–55 (tab. 4.3), 80 (tab. 5.3), 127–129.

⁴² Karnak, Festival Hall of Thutmose III. Taylor, *Iconography*, 179 (fig. 9.72).

⁴³ Taylor, *Iconography*, 110–111 (tab. 7.1, fig. 7.11). The Seth animal appears also in Old or Middle Kingdom petroglyphs in Dakhleh Oasis. P. L. Polkowski, "Seth on Rocks: Rock Art Imagery in Dakhleh Oasis of the Pharaonic Period", in G. E. Bowen and C. A. Hope (eds), *The Oasis Papers 9: A Tribute to Anthony J. Mills after Forty Years of Research in Dakhleh Oasis* (Oxford, 2019), 159–166.

⁴⁴ J. Kahl, "Religiöse Sprachsensibilität in den Pyramidentexten und Sargtexten am Beispiel des Namens des Gottes Seth", in S. Bickel and B. Mathieu (eds), *Actes de la table ronde internationale "Textes des pyramides versus textes des sarcophages", IFAO, 24–26 septembre 2001* (BdE 139; Cairo, 2004), 219–246.

⁴⁵ Taylor, *Iconography*, 35–37; Te Velde, *Seth, God*, 32–46, 74–80.