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“A Tail in the Mouth”:- Ouroboros during the Greco-Roman Period

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Tail in the mouth
Many of-Faces
Great One

Abstract

One of the most well-known ancient images is the Ouroboros, which portrays a serpent or mythical beast swallowing its tail, continually re-birthing itself and shaping a circle, representing eternity and the cyclical nature of things that start once again after they end. It is also the symbol of duality and dualising power. The standard ouroboros is used to refer to the ichnographically steady icon of a ring serpent with its tail at its mouth or inside it, associated with the cyclical time-eternity. It appeared during the New Kingdom and spread throughout the history of Egypt. From Egypt, and as an art motif and religious symbol, it may have spread to the Levant, and then around the world. This article is a comparative study on the ouroboros imagery of the Greco-Roman period. It examines the link between the different kinds of monuments attesting the ouroboros. The study also traces the development of the symbol, and compares monuments of this period with earlier archaeological evidences. The imagery of the ouroboros was inspired by a variety of iconographic representations, on tombs, coffins, magical materials, temples, and on the like.

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1. Introduction

The serpent encompasses an incredible assortment of typical meanings that derive from its nature. The extraordinary property it possesses within the animal kingdom is the main characteristic that gave the serpent its symbolic significance (Becker 1994:343). Serpents have two symbolic characters in many cultures around the world. Among the characters that associated serpents with religions are their representations of deities, healing, and creative powers. They were also linked to the underworld evil, harm, and destructive influences (Skinner 2001:44). It was also the symbol of power, wisdom, force, energy, eternity, good, evil, pure, simple, etc. (Cirlot 1971:385; Jobes 1961:20).

The serpent has been regarded as a mysterious creature with extraordinary powers since the early times of Egypt. It is related to religion, magic, and astronomy. Its symbolism demonstrates the stark contrast between two symbols within one creature: worship and fright. It has been seen as a guardian, evil, creator, representative of death (Lurker 1989:370); it is also an embodiment of life-giving powers in ancient Egyptian mythology (Manfred 1980:108). It also symbolizes of eternal life and resurrection (Moscati 2004:125-26).

2. Ouroboros

The Ouroboros depicts a snake or a serpent-like creature,¹ while biting its own tail. In nature, serpents sometimes do eat their tails (fig.1). It is not believed to be a common event, but it does happen. This rare behavior is usually understood as a sign of a serpent in its death throw. However, the way serpents do it and why they do it is what makes the creature unique. Different theories have been developed explain the occurrence of this phenomenon. One theory is the stress resulting high blood temperature of the serpent' bodies, leading them to bite their tails and even attempted to swallow them, which undoubtedly cause harm to the animal. The other reason is when they feel starving when no food is available. In this case, they may bite their tail. While the final cause may be simple, the confusion may cause it to think its tail is a target and try to attack it (Mack 1999: 359; Matthews 2022; Djeasily 2022).



Fig.1: A serpent bites its own tail

cf. <https://exopetguides.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/snake-biting-tail-696x463.jpg.webp>
(Accessed on 10 June 2022)

The origin of the serpents goes back to ancient Egypt, *c.* 1300 BC.² when it first became known as a symbolic reference of the Ouroboros, which contains the ideas of eternity and infinity, through the endless cycles of time. However, the image continued throughout history and left a lasting impact on different cultures around the

¹ In some cultures (China, Japan, Hindu), it is portrayed as a dragon. (Erik 2002:76; Wolf-Dieter 2004: 219)

² The earliest known case of the ouroboros image is decorated the Tutankhamun's gold shrine during the 18th Dynasty.

world. The image of the ouroboros was significant in the ancient world, when the symbol had various meanings that differed from one culture to another. Maravelia (2018:24) believes that the Ouroboros, with its circularly rotating symbol and cyclical motion as a creature never to leak its own cycle, represents the everlasting return, the never-ending cycle of resurrection.

From Egypt, the Ouroboros found its pathway to the religious and mythological symbolism of different ancient civilizations, like the ancient Phoenicians, Greece, Rome (Deonna 1952:164-170) and China (van der Sluijs & Peratt 2009:4). For the ancient Greeks, the Ouroboros had more symbolic meanings and was neither described nor given a mythological foundation (van der Sluijs & Peratt 2009:8). In fact, Plato, the Greek philosopher, declared it to be the first living creature in the universe, parallel to the universe itself, that was "bringing order from chaos," "circular being," "self-sufficient," and "far more excellent than one that lacked anything" (Plato 1998:33; Hatherly 2017:2), that the self-swallowing being represents a completely self-contained system with no need for anything outside of itself.

2-1. History of Development

It is clear that neither the Ouroboros serpent nor those employed in hieroglyphics writing were ever meant to depict any true natural species that could be observed easily with the naked eye (Reemes 2015:55). The creature mostly serves as a symbol that conveys religious, magical, and astronomical connotations. Ouroboros usually has a stable icon that is identical to that of Ancient Egypt, as a circled serpent holding onto its tail in its mouth. The symbol is animated of ideas such as the endlessness of cosmic life, cyclic time, renewal, and immortality, or evil itself.

Amongst the several ancient Egyptian theories about the process of creation, according to the Coffin Texts (Adriaan de Buck 1951:146, Spell 321; Reemes 2015:64-65), the universe was created as a remarkable occasion in the primeval flood, which was surrounded by a cyclone of energy related to the spiraling coils of a serpent symbolized by an Ouroboros fixing the world (Hornung 1996:164; Reemes 2015:64-65). Like the periodical cycles of day and night and the seasons, the yearly flooding of the Nile, the ancient Egyptians represented the Ouroboros as the cyclical nature of life and death.

One of the ouroboros's interpretations is that the serpent rounds the earth to keep it together. A spell from the pyramid of Titi, refers to Ouroboros: "your tail is in your mouth, attacker snake, the great one he had encircled has come forth - snake, protector the earth - snake, protector the gold" (Sethe 1922:373-74, PT.393). In this spell, the Ouroboros, which usually decorates the entrance of the tomb, services the dead king as protector of the tomb. He is also commanded to also guard the earth (underground tomb) and its treasures (gold).

The Ouroboros also has a kind of life feeding on itself in the act of creation. Similarly, it is connected to the Egyptian concepts of time *nHH* and *Dt*. According to Niwiski and others (Niwinski 1981:44-53; Assmann 2019:25; Maravelia, 2018), it primarily represents endless time and the edge of the structured world. Biting its own tail represents endless time, as it began with the performance of creation (Pinch 2006:119), which is the model for all other cyclic renewal events, such as the coronation of the king. Niwiski provided a diagram for his conception of the cycle of time represented by the ouroboros in relation to a person's life and afterlife and its

relation to both *nHH* and *Dt* (fig.2). Time advances through the ouroboros's body, beginning at the serpent's mouth (a person's birth) and advancing toward its tail (a person's death).

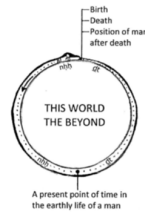


Fig.2: Niwiński's diagram of the Ouroboros
cf. Niwiński, (1981:fig.4.)

The next section discusses examples of the development of the Ouroboros from ancient Egypt and down to the Greco-Roman Period. The earliest known Ouroboros figurine is a grey and brown mottled steatite coiled serpent ring amulet (fig.3) dated back to the Prehistoric Period.³ Both Mehen serpent *mHn* 'coiled one' serpent and the Ouroboros were closely related in this early period, and some of the earliest evidence is some game-boards, which were popular from the Early Period through the Old Kingdom, though the specific rules of the games are unknown. The serpent is depicted on a board as a disc with its head in the middle and tail along one edge (fig.4)⁴. Additionally, it has been suggested that the game board itself had developed certain symbolic parallels with the funerary ritual and played a role as an amulet used by the deceased (Shore 1963:88-91; Rothöhler 1999:10-11), who gained eternity and guaranteed his own resurrection by winning the game (Skinner 2001:45; Kendall 2007:42).



Fig.3: Prehistoric Period ring Amulet -
University College London
cf. Petrie Museum Online



Fig.4: Snake shaped gaming board
cf. Egypt Museum Online

In the Pyramid Texts, the oldest surviving examples of Egyptian funerary texts, which are the first-born of Ouroboros occurs. Additionally, a few number of spells directly affect concepts in some way that are closely related to Mehen serpent bear reference to the Ouroboros imaginary during the later periods (Hornung 1992:50-51). Furthermore, the decorations on the coffin lids during the Middle Kingdom were made to resemble the sky without any obvious representation of serpents. Spell 760 reads: "As for the one who is familiar with the names of these roads, it is he who enters (go in) to the Coiled One (Mehen)" (Landborg 2014:28-29). Through the body of Mehen, the deceased is passing the serpent's body and getting out over its tail, the matter that is also clearly represented in the sun's night-time passage through the *Book of Amduat*.

³ It is part of the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology's collection at University College London, UC 38463.

⁴ It is housed in Cambridge's Fitzwilliam Museum. E.GA.4464.1943.

Serpents were heavily featured in the New Kingdom's funeral texts, such as the *Book of the Dead* and several other Netherworld books, such as the *Book of Amduat* (Piccione 1990:43-52; Bochi 1994:56-9; Lamy 1997:29-65; Hornung 1999), the *Book of Caverns* and the *Book of Gates*, which were used to decorate various monuments at that time. Serpents represented both the forces of destruction and rebirth. They were thought to be the souls of gods or even demons, like Apophis, or "the serpent of darkness," a representation of terrible power that perpetually terrifies the journey of the sun god Ra (Wilkinson 2003:221). Mehen, the helpful serpent, on the other hand, was depicted as Ra's ally and the beneficent power in the underworld who resided in the funeral writings and Books of the Underworld. When Mehen shows up when Ra urgently needs his protection, the great battle against Apophis begins in the *Amduat*. By contrast, he guards Ra on his bark from the start in the *Books of the Gates and the Night* (Rothöler 1999:12-13). This scene (fig.5) from the tomb of Ramesses I clearly visualize such struggle, where the bark of the Sun god is passing, and the serpent's job is to spit fire in order to dispel the darkness in front of it, and Ra appears encircled by Mehen, who is representative of time.

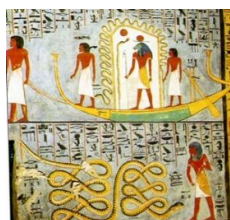


Fig.5: Serpent Mehen - 19th Dynasty - tomb of Ramesses I
cf. http://www.thebanmappingproject.com/sites/browse_tombimages_830.html
(Accessed on 22 June 2022)



Fig.6: First hour of the *Book of Gates* - second golden shrine of King Tutankhamun
cf. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ra-Osiris_in_the_Enigmatic_Book.JPG (Accessed on 22 June 2022)


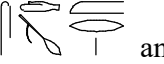
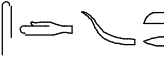
The earliest explicit surviving depictions of an ouroboros, appeared in the first hour of the *Book of Gates* on the second golden shrine of King Tutankhamun (fig.6), when Ra and Osiris were united in one mummy-form body in the *Amduat* (Darnell 2004:80). Two serpents of the god Mehen encircling the tail in the mouth, one around the god's head (enclosing the heavens) and the other around his feet (enclosing the Underworld), are the earliest surviving examples of the protective Ouroboros motif. The solar circuit is suggested by the revolving Ouroboroi in day and night forms (Reemes 2015:155). The middle section of the figure is occupied with the solar disc. According to Assmann (1975:33-34), the Ouroboros serpent that surrounds a sun disc bearing an image of a young sun is a blessing-symbol of rebirth into the eternities of cosmic existence as well as a representation of an everlasting cyclical time.


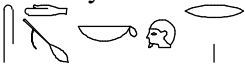
After the solar appropriation of the Ouroboros in the form of Mehen in the Coffin Texts, the reptile becomes in the New Kingdom the very cement of the union of Ra and Osiris by the elaboration of the concept of the celestial maternity of the two divinities. The Ouroboros occurs on sarcophagi, papyri and other monuments of the Late period, and it continued as long as the Egyptian religion survives. This process continues in the Greco-Roman period on a wide-range of monuments, which are intimately interconnected to varying degrees within and around the Ouroboros.

2-2. Names and Figurines

From ancient Greece, it is believed this symbol received its name “ouroboros” as it is known today from the Greek term *ouroboros* (ὄροβόρος ‘tail-devouring’), which composed of the two words *aura* or “tail” and *boros* or “eating” (Chevalier & Gheerbrant 1996:728-729; Maravelia 2018:6). Researchers with many different research interests, such as iconology, mythology, history of religion and science, etc., continue to be drawn to the symbol's name.

In ancient Egyptian texts, the Ouroboros symbol does not appear to have a particular name. Unfortunately, the Ouroboros symbol itself does not show up in the known ancient Egyptian texts as a hieroglyphic sign. Yet the ancient Egyptians appear to have used a variety of names or expressions for this creature through history, among which is the most used phrase *sd-m-rA* “tail-in-mouth”, the comparable of the term *Ouroboros*, while the whole phrase could act as a verb “to be tail in mouth”⁵ (Caminos, 1964:85-86). The earliest surviving reference to this name dates back to the First Intermediate period and is found in “graffito 25” from the calcite quarries at Hatnub (Rudolf 1928: pl.25; Reemes 2015:10).

During the Greco-Roman period, the same name was used for the identification of the Ouroboros, while the most common definition was used as *sd-m-rA*  , var.  and  which means “a siege” (PL 973). The phrase also occupied a special place in temple inscriptions of this period, where it basically refers to the violent or burnt offering of bloody sacrificial victims (Chassinat 1929:pl.83; PL 973; Cauville 1997: lines 11-12). In general, the term *sd-m-rA* is rather an uncommon expression, which is identified as a discrete word on its own during the Greco Roman period. Additionally, none of the texts from the temples make any references to the Ouroboros as a creature, and most of temple texts deal with animal sacrifice (PL 973; Reemes 2015:27). Despite being three or four centuries after the Greek term's first use, it appears that the Greek word, *ὄροβόρος*, and the hieroglyphic name *sd-m-rA*, has the problem that its most recent occurrences are only recorded as far back as the early 1st Century BC. (Kenyon 1893:xix).

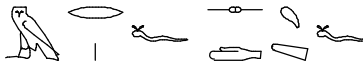
Another name, was the use of a “tail upon mouth,” *sd tp rA*,  perhaps related expression a presumed predecessor of the later expression *sd m rA*. The definition should refer to a snake that bites its own tail or, more figuratively, to an army encircling a city in a continuous ring (Wb 4:364). That association with the serpent is seen in the earliest literary evidence of the Pyramid Texts among the so-called “snake-spells.” Pyramid Text 689b reads:  “your tail is in your mouth” (Sethe 1987:373-74). It is an oath that is strengthened by renaming the snake and identifying him as the attacker snake, where his tail lied inside the mouth. According to Leitz 1996:389-91), such spells are typically placed near the entrances or doors of tombs in order to direct their ferocious energies into the protection of the dead king as guardians of the tomb and its contents or to protect the departed king from any threat posed by the potential presence of terrifying serpents in the tomb.

⁵ Lines 11–12 of the Nitocris Adoption Stela from the Late period.

The serpent holding its tail in his mouth is the most widely used representation of the Ouroboros in ancient Egypt, but there is another form of this symbolic serpent that appeared in many religious and astronomical scenes starting from the Middle Kingdom until the Greco-Roman period, which is the “Many of Faces” serpent.⁶ A vignette from the 6th hour of the *Amduat*, as a part of the *Book of the Hidden*

Chamber, in which Ra “the one who becomes” (as Khepri)⁷ and his flesh ⁸ are represented protected from destruction by and within the folds of that great serpent. A

text from the tomb of Seti I read: .....

 *aSA-Hrw m sAw s.d.f m rA.f*⁹ “The *Many-of-Faces*

serpent is a protector His tail is in his mouth” (Hornung 1963:110-111). The five-headed serpent¹⁰ is represented as a caretaker in a scene that refers to this “encircling of creation” (fig.7). It is easy to recognize that starting from the Late period and through the Greco-Roman period, in contrast to the *Amduat* picture, the *Many-of-Faces* tail does not coil back around on itself. Two scenes from the tomb of Iufaa (fig.8), which dates back to the 26th Dynasty, represent this form of Ouroboros with different multi-heads. One has four-human heads, tagged as “The one who emerges from the Nun”; and the other has nine-cobra heads, tagged as “One who is in purity, who is a manifestation of Nun”. However, both have the same title in the text above, as *s.d.f m rA.f* (Landgráfová & Míčková 2018:61 & 63-64).

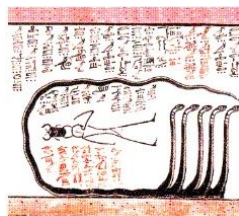


Fig.7: Sixth hour of the *Amduat* - tomb of Thutmose III

cf. http://www.sofiatopia.org/maat/hidden_chamber03.htm(Accessed on 19 June 2022)



Fig.8: “Many of Faces” on the wall of the tomb chamber of Iufaa – Abusir - 26th Dynasty

cf. Landgráfová & Míčková, (2018: figs.4 & 5)

Another popular form of the Greco-Roman period Ouroboros figure is the so-called “Double-headed ouroboros,” which has a head of the same reptile or even a different creature (like crocodile) overlapping, alluding to the Nature's duality. This version of the Ouroboros depicts a single serpent consists of two creatures rather than the more well-known image of a single creature eating its own tail. This also likely represents contrasting forces which are combined to create a united whole. That serpent-headed symbol of eternity appeared in many other scenes during the Greco Roman period.

⁶ This style of serpent illustration is typically found on magical papyri.

⁷ From the versions of this book in the tombs of both Thutmose III and Sethi I.

⁸ From the versions of this book in the tomb of Sethi I.

⁹ The phrase *s.d.f m rA.f* is intended to reverberate with the expression *s.d.f m rA.f*.

¹⁰ Three to five serpent heads can be seen in New Kingdom images, whereas as many as seven are shown in Late Period works, and more during the Greco-Roman Period.

3. The Greco-Roman Ouroboros

After evolving into the iconography of Mehen, an ancient god known since the Predynastic Period, the ouroboros, which originated in Egypt and spread to the Greco-Roman cultural sphere, found its way onto numerous monuments throughout the Roman Empire from the end of the Hellenistic period to Late Antiquity. Principally, four thematic types of this serpent can be distinguished. The first feature is in the form of a serpent coiled around itself, the second as a subjugated ouroboros stepped by a victorious deity. The third type of the Ouroboros encircled heavenly body, while the last type depicts the serpent around the Sun God in a guardian role (van der Sluijs & Peratt 2009:8) or other gods and goddesses.

To comprehend the circumstances under which the ouroboros symbol was incorporated into the Egyptian monuments, it is important to first discuss the origins, functions, and significance of this serpent in ancient Egypt. Through the history of Egypt, especially during the Greco-Roman Period, representations of ouroboros are included within tombs, coffins, temples, etc. For the purpose of this article, the monuments are classified according to their field as: astronomical, magical and other regular images.

3-1 Astronomical images

The Representation of astronomical scenes on tombs, coffin lids, temples, and other different monuments was a tradition that lasted throughout Egyptian history's New Kingdom and into the Late periods. But until the Greek zodiac was introduced, the system was mostly unbothered. The serpent motif gained popularity during the Greco-Roman era and began to be seen in different contexts, including tombs, temples, plaques, coins, coffins, gems, and amulets. By that time, the use of the Ouroboros serpent increased, as did the way it was structured and organized.

This section explores the role of the ouroboros within a variety of ancient Egyptian astronomical scenes dating back to the Greco-Roman period, which were infrequently incorporated into the iconography used in astronomy. Before the Greco-Roman Period, there are no true examples of ouroboros iconography in the ancient zodiacs¹¹ (Rose 1946; Gingerich & Young 1995), but then the article proves that knowledge of ouroboros existed from the New Kingdom and Late Period, and occupied an essential place in Egyptian symbolism until the Byzantine Period and possible beyond.

When compared with the other creatures, especially serpents, the Ouroboros figures do not occupy a great part of many zodiacs of the Greco-Roman period. The serpentine creature that bites its tails, nevertheless, resided in some celestial settings and seemed to have similar purposes to temples. Furthermore, numerous coffins and tombs have ouroboros figures, along with numerous coins, stelae, and papyri, demonstrating the very regional nature of funerary art.

¹¹ A belt of stars called the Zodiac is on the sun's path. Since the majority of the constellations are animal representations, the name itself is Greek and means "figures of animals." Beginning in the 2nd Century BC., on the temple of Khnum in Esna (now completely destroyed), this style of Egyptian astronomical scene flourished and was used to embellish various types of monuments until the Byzantine Period. We can identify the impact of Egyptian science, religion, and art in all of these horoscopes.

Ouroboros was one of the mythological creatures associated with the decans,¹² (Neugebauer & Parker 1969, Relek & Ernest 2003:67; Conman 2006-2009:7) constellations and other astronomical bodies dwell the zodiac of the Greco-Roman period. The creature may ensign to the spherical zodiac itself, the endless cycle of constellations through the night sky. In general, serpent shape bodies with different wide shapes (winged, with human or animal feet or arms, multi-headed, etc.) are taken good position around this kind of astronomical maps, especially several decans which were depicted as astral serpents starting from the Late period.

Ouroboros is often symbolized by the wheel of time. One of its figures is the zodiac, with both its 36 decans and the zodiac's twelve signs represent the moved circle of life. Some ancient texts mention a serpent of light as a feature in heavens, leading some to believe that the Milky Way may have served as an inspiration for the ouroboros. In modern astronomy, it is seen as a clean symbol of the Milky Way Galaxy (Hatherly 2017:3), with the eye of the serpent serving as its central point. Otherwise, it may even have been inspired by the Aurorae ring (Alfvén 1981:1; van der Sluijs & Peratt 2009).¹³

Among those scenes that show this ordinary connection between the Ouroboros and the astronomical scenes throughout Egyptian history, is a distinctive wall scene dating back to the 26th Dynasty from the tomb of Iufaa (fig.9), representing it rarely as a hippo-headed creature imitating those two female hippopotamuses that stand on either side and flank it. Each represents the Northern Constellation *Rrt*. Given that constellation's affinity with the north, the scene is suitably positioned on the northern wall. According to Reemes (2015:240), this picture serves as a border protecting the sun and a reminder of its eternity.



Fig.9: Tomb chamber of Iufaa, at Abusir cf. Landgráfová & Míčková, (2018: fig.3)

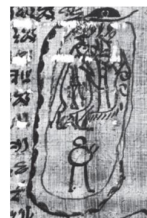




Fig.10: Papyrus Deir el-Medina 44 cf. Koenig, (1999:280)

The symbol of an ouroboros was used in daily life as a representation that encircles the constellation *Rrt*. This theme, occurs in Papyrus Deir el-Medina 44 (fig.10), (Koenig 1999:259-281) which is the earliest surviving papyrus-amulet dates to the 20th Dynasty. It contains the image of *Rrt* hippopotamus with an effigy of

¹² Decans  (Wb 1,430) var.  *bAkyw* (PL 304), are the stars that were seen as servants of the sun and moon and the main purpose was used to tell the hours by the night. They are thirty-six stars formed the southern group belt, constellations, or subdivisions of constellations, rising at particular hours of night. Each one is rising heliacally for 10 days apart and invisible for 70 days. Each period of 10 days was marked by the heliacal rising of the next decan, which was used for time-keeping. It occupied a clear part of many other monuments right down till the Greco-Roman Period. Decan can be represented by one or more of the following elements: figure, deity and decanal stars (single star, number of stars or dot symbols).

¹³ Aurorae is the northern and southern lights, which are partially ionized gases that glow when the solar wind, in particular, causes the earth's ionosphere to receive an increased amount of charged particles from space.

Amun encircled by an ouroboros. Beginning with a paraphrase of the well-known Book of Protecting the Body, the content is a type of counter-spell intended to shield a person (Koenig 1999:260; Reemes 2015:194). The huge ouroboros is shown as a standing, pregnant hippopotamus bearing a little representation of Amun inside her belly in the encircled *Rrt*. In front of her there is another figure of a royal man standing and wearing a white crown, plausibly identified with the constellation Orion.

Current constellation Draco resembles the northern constellation *Rrt* from ancient Egypt, which is always portrayed as a female hippopotamus. The Draco constellation (fig.11), which the ancients believed to encircle all the celestial spheres (Maravelia 2018:29-30), is one of Ouroboros' forms, which are thought to embrace the whole universe.

The Ouroboros appears in many other astronomical scenes. It made its initial appearance during the Greco-Roman Period on the priceless zodiac that adorned the amazing papyrus known as the Art of Eudoxus papyrus¹⁴ (fig.12), which goes back to the Ptolemaic Period. The final column of the papyrus is decorated by an ouroboros labelled with the names of the zodiacal signs, and inside the circle is written: "Celestial Oracles of Serapis" (Evans 2004:32-35).




Fig.11: A photo of the Milky Way by NASA
cf. https://apod.nasa.gov/apod/image/0403/v838feb04_hst_bck.jpg (Accessed on 12 June 2022)



Fig.12: Papyrus Art of Eudoxus
– First half of 2nd Century AD.
cf. Evans, (2004:fig.9)

Moreover, there is one further documentary evidence, and among the big number of the Greco-Roman period coins which dwelled by the zodiacal signs; a coin from the reign of Antoninus Pius from Alexandria (fig.13) (Evans 2004:32 & fig.8c) is decorated by a figure of ouroboros surrounded by the sun and the moon,¹⁵ where and the serpent itself is encircled by the twelve zodiac signs. On an unusual Roman period stela (fig.14), a perfectly circular ouroboros is appears surrounding the god Osiris, in reference to the dead sun, which is reborn at sunrise. Six stars are placed in the empty space on either side of the deity's image, symbolizing the depths of night. This motif of the surrounding ouroboros and the corpse of the dead or Osiris itself

within it have a graphic and thematic character with the hieroglyph  *Dt* (Fairman 1945,124; Kákosy 1964:1251), associated with the eternity, and is found a place with different forms in the hieroglyphic texts of the Greco-Roman period. This kind of environment is intended to strengthen him and keep what is inside the sphere safe from evil forces (like demons).

The iconography of Osiris in cohabitation with the serpent clearly adheres to the New Kingdom belief in the solar-Osirian union within the god Mehen. A love song in the Book of the Dead, spell 172 (Hornung 1979:351–358), in the mouth of Isis

¹⁴ It was mentioned by Leptines as an introduction to astronomy for members of the Ptolemaic court and is the first surviving Greek astronomical work. It is now in the Louvre Museum, no.2325.

¹⁵ They are represented as busts of Helios and Selene.

and Nephthys, to their brother Osiris, with a record from his head to foot, mentioned: “your teeth are those in the mouth of the ouroboros”. This passage clearly shows the relationship between the god and the serpent, where they both share the power of the other. The concept of the ouroboros here identifies the circle of time passing through the darkness of the underworld, while during the day it is accomplished by the Sun's passage across the sky.



Fig.13: A coin from the reign of Antoninus Pius
cf. Evans, (2004:32, fig.8c)



Fig.14: A stela - Roman period
cf. Petrie, (1896:fig.12)

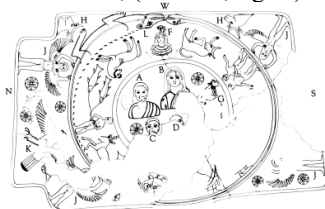


Fig.15: Petosiris A zodiac, Dakhla oasis
cf. Clagett, (1995:100a)



Fig.16: Dendera round zodiac.
cf. Louvre Museum online

In the Roman period Dakhla Oasis necropolis what seems to be an ouroboros-like appearance on a painted ceiling in the tomb of Petosiris of Qaret el-Muzawwiqa¹⁶ (Osing 1982; Riggs 2005:161). The painted ceiling tomb, which consists of two chambers, is decorated with a more-or-less circular zodiac. Without any mythological animals inside one of the two zodiacs itself, Petosiris A zodiac,¹⁷ two representations of a serpent and a crocodile facing off, replicating the traditional Ouroboros motif, surround the entire astrological landscape, encircling the celestial vault (fig.15). They are represented with their mouths touching one another and their tails connected as one. Their mouths and bodies were a continuous red color, which alludes to the solar circuit, which Whitehouse (1998:264), suggested that it may symbolize “opposed aspects of eternity.”

Directly inside its border, one realizes the zodiac ring, which in turn includes a central area with stars-shaped rosettes together with two most recognizable examples of busts for a female and a male that have possibly represented planets or both the Sun and the Moon. Four standing, winged, nude Nut goddesses—one in each corner—support the entire celestial vault surrounding the double ouroboros; they refer to the four cardinal points of the world. These goddesses are versions of those seen supporting the round zodiac of Dendera (fig.16).

¹⁶ One of the best preserved and ornamented Roman Egyptian tombs is this cut rock tomb of the priest Petosiris in the Dakhla Oasis. It possibly belongs to the late first and early 2nd Century AD. and is located on a ridge known as Qaret el-Muzawaqqa.

¹⁷ Petosiris A zodiac adorns the first room of Petosiris' tomb.

There is also a single figure of “Many of the faces” on Petosiris Bzodiac¹⁸ (fig.17), which is settled a part above a human-legged winged eye of Horus, and appeared as a coiled serpent with ten erected uraeus heads. The same figure appears also on the Athribis zodiacs from the tomb of the two brothers, Ibameni and Pamehyt¹⁹ (fig.18) (Petrie 1908:12-13, 23-24 & pl.xxxvi; Neugebauer & Parker 1969:96-98; *PM* 5,33-34) among a wide number of mythological creatures surrounded totally by the zodiac. Eight of these creatures occupied a part of it. The first is on the west side appeared as a serpent with three heads; on the north side there is a serpent with four uraeus heads; on the eastern side there is a figure for a serpent with seven heads of uraeus; and finally, on the east side there are two human-headed serpent, nine-headed serpent, serpent with four heads, uraeus with two falcon-headed, and finally a serpent with two crowned heads (between horns are solar-disc-shaped crowns).

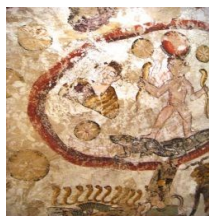


Fig.17: Petosiris B Zodiac.
cf. <https://egyptmyluxor.weebly.com/el-mazawwaka-tombs---dakhla.html>
(Accessed on 19 June 2022)



Fig.18: The two Zodiacs of Pamehyt and Ibameni - Athribis
cf. <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/museums-static/digitalegypt/athribis/tomb.html>
(Accessed on 18 June 2022)



Fig.19: Wooden coffin of Heter - Roman Period from Thebes, now lost
cf. Reemes, (2015:fig.97)




Fig.21: *Book of Caverns* – tomb of Ramesses VI
cf. Piankoff, (1954:pl.20)

On a few well-known specimens of coffins from the Greco-Roman period, the ouroboros astronomical symbolism still appears. On the painted wooden coffin of Heter (fig.19)²⁰ (Brugsch 1880:21; Neugebauer & Parker 1969:93; *PM* I,647) which dated back to 125 AD. and was published by Brugsch (1863:30-35, pls.17, 34 & 35), Ouroboros occupied a place on the coffin's exterior and, on the upper part of the coffin's head end. The inscription above the figure is ordinary deceased wishes, that the sun disc may shine and enlighten his mummy. The double raised headed (facing one another) circled serpent has no tail, and is surrounded a standing representation of the goddess Nut, her arms supporting *nw*-jars in a horizontal line, with a scarab and winged solar disc are represented above her head. The raised heads of the Ouroboros

¹⁸ The second chamber of Petosiris' tomb in the Dakhla Oasis is decorated with images from the Petosiris B zodiac.

¹⁹ At Athribis, close to Nag-Hamad, is the tomb of the two brothers Ibameni and Pamehyt. It dates to the Roman era in the late 2nd Century AD. The ceiling of the hall features a representation of the heavenly scene.

²⁰ The coffin, which is famous for its astronomical inscriptions, is dated back to the Roman Period, about 125 AD. It is now lost.

are in the style of the hieroglyph  *Dt*, reference to the symbolic ouroboroids mode of *Dt*-time.

The Esna zodiac (figs.20, 22 & 23)²¹ (Sauneran 1969;no.418; Neugebauer & Parker 1969:82-83; *PM* 6,116), depicts a wide range of serpentine mythological creatures, arranged around the decans, constellations, and planets. In fact, this temple contains the greatest number of these mythological creatures that appeared in a zodiac. They have an extensive variety of figures, but the easiest to recognize is the traditional form of the Ouroboros with a tail in the mouth. The upper register of the seventh strip (fig.20)²² to the north of the center is occupied by many serpent figures. Among them are two rectangular-shape ouroboros with an uncertain figure inside. One of them appeared under a crocodile-tailed scarab, while to the left and in front of the scarab, there is another figure for one more rectangular ouroboros has his tail erected, with two heads (one at each end).





Fig.20: Esna zodiac - seventh strip
cf. on the site



Fig.22: Esna zodiac - first strip
cf. on the site




Fig. 23: Esna zodiac - second strip
cf. on the site

That rectangular-shape is a related image to the same figure ouroboros in the third section of the Book of Caverns, fourth section, fourth tableau, middle register (fig.21). It is called the   *wr* “Great One” who protects the eye and soul of Re, and the corpse of Osiris (Reemes 2015:145-6). In addition to the protection of humans, like the 19th Dynasty terracotta, in which the rectangular shape of Ouroboros surrounds the mother and her child (fig.36), also used for protecting heavenly bodies as well, such as those appearing around the constellation Rrt, as on the Papyrus Deir el-Medina 44 (fig.10).

²¹ The god Khnum is the subject of the ancient Greco-Roman Esna temple. The Hypostyle Hall's rectangular zodiac on the ceiling dates to Vespasian-rule. Domitian's (69-96 AD.).

²² The whole astronomical scene is covered by the seven strips that form the ceiling.

The other form of the Ouroboros serpent, “the Many of Faces”, found a place in the astronomical scenes of the Greco-Roman period as a part of the mythological creatures, especially among the rectangular zodiac of Esna. It appeared many times on three of the seven strips. On the first strip, on the south of the center, it appeared twice as a serpent, shown with a tree over its head (fig.22), and had two human heads. The other form is represented as a four human-headed coiled serpent. On the second strip (fig.23) to the south of the center of the same zodiac, the creature appeared as a uraeus serpent with two heads. On the seventh strip north of the center, there are more multi-headed ouroboros (fig.20). A two-headed, coiling uraeus serpent is visible above the ram-headed wind. Another one appeared under the figure of a lion, as if a coiled eight-headed uraeus serpent. While on the same strip, also ‘the Many of the faces’ appeared finally in a unique figure as a four-headed serpent (two heads at each end of his body). Two uraeus with human heads and four human legs are to the left, and two with serpent heads and four bird legs are to the right.

In general, the entire symbols and images of the inner and outer circles around the extraordinary ouroboros on astronomical scenes undoubtedly represent the never-ending circle of time. The matter, which was usual in the New Kingdom as clear on (figs.14 & 15), the ouroboros showed encircling the cosmos, that was identified in the first scene with the six five-pointed stars, occupied the empty areas on either side of Osiris's picture. Each star can be interpreted as an acronym for the word  | *wnwt* “hour” (Reemes 2015:123).²³ The other two reflected the twelve zodiacal signs on one or the sun and the moon (the twelve zodiac signs create the outer circle around the serpent) on the other. They all reflect his clear astronomical feature.


It is noteworthy that among the group of the 36 decan stars that occupied a good part of the astronomical scenes of this period, the  *qd* decan (no.28) always appeared with the figure of the “Many of faces” ouroboros. It appears in two zodiacs: the Dnendera circular zodiac as a four uraei-headed serpent on a support (fig.16), and the Nag Hamad zodiac as a serpent with four human heads on a support (fig.24).



Fig.24: Nag Hamad zodiac
cf. Neugebauer & Parker, (1964:pl.39)



Fig.25: Litany of Re, tomb of Seti II
cf. After a drawing by Brodbeck A. in Hornung, (1977:fig.55)

The double-headed Ouroboros occupied central parts in astronomical scenes. In any case, the genuine purpose of this double serpent and crocodile headed ouroboros is mentioned in a different course and alludes to the duality nature of the universe. Those dual creatures, consisting of a crocodile and a serpent, especially those connected with the serpent, were very popular and inhabited the zodiacs of this period. On the first strip (fig.22) of Esna zodiac again, and directly below a Nut

²³ Reemes suggested that they refer to the initial six hours of god Re's nighttime journey through the Underworld.

figure's feet, is an image of a double figure combination between a serpent and a falcon-headed lion, and one more in front of the *Rrt* Constellation, in the form of a serpent and a crocodile-headed lion. As well as on the second strip (fig.23) of the same zodiac, there are two more creatures connected between the crocodile and the serpent in a single figurine each.

It is believed that this creature with two heads had a special significance. It appears in the opening scene of the Litany of Re alongside the serpent and crocodile which decorates the tomb of Set II (fig.25). At the center of the three-registers scene, the sun disc is noticeable, while, a serpent and a crocodile are represented individually in the registers below and above the disc, each moving towards a hartebeest head. The same creature, hartebeest, appeared after centuries, under the bodies of both the serpent and the crocodile; one in each corner of the west side of the zodiac of Petosiris appeared again as symbols of twilight. Piankoff (1964:16, no.11) thinks that the crocodile and serpent are allude to the solar disc.

The two heads of Petosiris' Ouroboros are in the west corner of the zodiac, when nature the western gate of the *Duat* is guarded by both the crocodile and the serpent that protect the sun-god (fig.15). Reemes (2015:269) believes that having the serpent and crocodile facing each other gives the impression that their bodies are facing different directions as they travel with the sun. Additionally, they are joined at the tail to form a single creature that is arranged in a circle, signifying the outer limit of organized reality.

3-2. Magical images

The inscriptions on Greco-Roman magical amulets, gems, stelae, and papyri, are usually decorated with extensive magical symbols, providing particular protection for the living as well as the dead (Evans 2004:14). The extraordinary shapes of magical scenes represented a kind of protection for people from demons. Ouroboros played a crucial protective function; its guardianship played a great role.



Fig.26: Bronze Amulet.
cf. Petrie, (1914:pl.xlix,
no.135aa)



Fig.27: Four winged deity
stand on an ouroboros
cf. Bonner, (1950:pl.100)



Fig.28: Metternich Stela
cf. British Museum
Online

This creature has a widespread illustration of some Greco-Roman amulets, were frequently utilized in everyday magic to protect the magician's customer as well (Pinch, 2006:78). One can identify gemstones with potential serpentine significance by closely comparing the amulets and gemstones. Among those amulets is that bronze one (fig.26) which is mentioned by Petrie (1914:30-31), who collected many of them. In its center is a large figure of the god Bes with two additional human faces, four wings, and standing on an Ouroboros surrounded by various noxious animals (demons). Another amulet, which dates back to the 3rd Century AD., depicts a deity with four-winged and four-arms holding four *wAs*-scepters, while standing on an ouroboros (fig.27).

The same literal-minded detail is typical of many scenes of the same period, such as the inscription that appeared on the Metternich stela²⁴ (fig.28) which was from the 30th Dynasty's latter days. The reverse of this magical stela shows the ouroboros surrounded by various animals, under the feet of the winged ithyphallic demonic solar god Harmerti.²⁵ The texts beneath contain a curse against “those who are in the water” (Scott 1951:201-217) which shows the great role ouroboros plays in controlling those demons. Another example is a magical papyrus from Heliopolis dates back to Late period,²⁶ which shows a winged deity with nine animal heads, holding snake wands and scepters, and encircled by torches (fig.29). To represent this deity, one must crush evil demons controlled and surrounded by ouroboros. The Middle Kingdom's typical magical wands featured this collection of terrifying animals; unfortunately, the later periods of Egyptian history do not contain any examples of them. However, these magical wands do not include the *ouroboros* serpent.

The iconography of the so-called "pantheistic" deities, which first appear in the Late period and ended with the Roman period, consistently includes an exact ouroboros. The imagery of such deities can be found on a variety of monuments of the Roman period, including amulets, papyri, stelae, plaques, and gemstones. The most prevalent variety of them is sometimes referred to as "Bes Pantheos".²⁷ The motivation behind these representations are thought to be apotropaic, serving as defense against actual dangerous animals like scorpions, snakes, turtles, lions, as well as other hostile demon forces. A real ouroboros, like those frequently found in Egyptian apotropaic magic, is encircling a group of dangerous wild animals beneath the standing form of the polymorphic deity.



Fig.29: A magical papyrus
cf. Pinch, (2006:37, no.17)



Fig.30: Faience amulet of
Bes Pantheos
cf. Reemes, (2015:fig.103)



Fig.31: “Horus on the
crocodiles” stela
cf. Hodjash, (2004:47, fig.7a)

The relationship between the ouroboros and the standing polymorphic deity may be better understood in light of the numerous three-dimensional representations of this iconography. A bronze amulet that is currently located in Berlin serves as an illustration (fig.30),²⁸ showing those animals in raised relief topped by the ouroboros under the feet of the deity. Another unique example (fig.31),²⁹ a part of a wide group representation called “cippi of Horus” or “Horus on the Crocodile” stela, has a crocodile beneath Horus' feet and an ouroboros surrounding the entire image; the head and tail of the ouroboros join together just under the nearest crocodile's right forepaw.

²⁴ It is on the reverse of the Magical Stela (Cippus of Horus), which is in the Metropolitan Museum, MMA 50.85. These stelae were frequently covered with ritual writings to cure the recipients of various diseases. Water was either drunk or applied to the injured area of the body after being poured over these manuscripts because it gained ritual power after coming into contact with these spells.

²⁵ It is one of the forms of the falcon-god Horus, which means "two eyes" (the sun and the moon).

²⁶ The papyrus is in the British Museum, EA10296.

²⁷ Egyptologists refer to it as such because it bears the head of the protective god Bes.

²⁸ It is currently kept as 1969W655 in the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery.

²⁹ It is now in the Pushkin State Museum in Moscow inv. no. I, 1a4474 (ИГ 1895).

The so-called "gem-stone," which the Greeks inscribed at an early date, is one of those stone amulets that are typically brightened by representations of gods, demons, humans, animals, or even zodiacal signs. Priceless collections for examining how Egyptian ceremonial tradition was incorporated into Greek literature are magical gems and papyri. It is well known that the magical gems have similar fundamental significance as magical papyri, yet magical gems are not always depictions of the magical papyri because the majority of the motifs seen on gems are almost never addressed in papyrological texts. Egypt is a suitable place for the specific type of engraved gems that are connected to the magical tradition there³⁰ (Cristea 2013; Quack, 2019). These gemstones created formulas for controlling the demons using magical and astrological methods, illnesses and medicinal practices that were brought on by demons and decans (Spier 1993:25).

Bonner (1950:250) believes that the reason for the appearance of the ouroboros on the magical gems is that it protects the owner from any harm; however nothing about the emblems or writings that surround it suggests a clear purpose. In some cases; it seems that it only had decorative function as mere a border of such stones. Ancient Egyptian-inspired Ouroboros sculptures, which may be found in large quantities in the collections of numerous museums, are used to decorate many of these mystical gems. Among those is a gem (fig.32),³¹ dated back to the Early Roman period, on which there is a description of the creature surrounding a scarab. The Ouroboros here is forming the Mehen, and shows his protective power as a guardian of Re on his nightly journey through the underworld. In the late Hellenistic and Roman periods, Greek was the most common tool for the production of textual gems and for many other types of amulets in Egypt and Italy (Faraone 2018:8).

However, despite the largely traditional ancient Egyptian imagery on these and other similar examples, another Roman period gem made of lapis lazuli (fig.33),³² also represented the serpent surrounded by a standing figure of Osiris directly above a winged scarab, which is a typical repetition of the same deity's depiction on stelae (fig.14). Most of the remaining collection is linked either to the solar themes this is the case, for example, of the figure called "Bes-Pantheos" and the child Horus seated on the lotus, or by a link to Osiris, as for Isis, Nephthys and even .



Fig.32: Magical Gem – 1st Century AD. cf. <https://art.thewalters.org/detail/21196/> (Accessed on 10 June 2022)



Fig.33: Magical Gem – 1st Century AD. cf. Bonner, (1950:254, pl.1, no.5)



Fig.34: A magical Gem. cf. Vitellozzi, (2018:fig.13)



Fig.35: Hematite magical gem cf. British Museum Online

The Ouroboros that surround Osiris's ability of the ancient Egyptian drawing from the 6th hour of the *Book of Amduat* carved on royal tomb walls which depict the creature encircling the deceased figure and a scarab on the mummy's head (fig.7). It is

³⁰ Gems were produced in the first three centuries AD., most likely in Alexandria.

³¹ It is now at the Walters Museum, Baltimore, MD, 42.872.

³² It is now in University of Michigan, Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, 1963.04.0002.

the same traditional issue that was popular on the coffins of the 21st Dynasty, and it continued to be common till the Ptolemaic period.

The protector ouroboros is also shown encircling the Egyptian deities. During the Roman period, gems having this theme were frequently produced. A spell on both a Greek magical papyrus (van der Sluijs & Peratt 2009:8) and a magical gem³³ (fig.34) advises: “A thick-bodied snake with its tail in its mouth should be depicted on a heliotrope stone (ἡλιοτρόπιος) in the shape of a wreath to represent Helios. An important scarab is housed inside the snake hole” (Vitelozzi 2018:202). This papyrus has only a text portrait of the ouroboros, but there is no accompanying writing on the papyrus in the British Museum; only the image is present. A number of magical gems, in the same tradition, were inscribed with ouroboros as a guardian for different Egyptian, classic Greek, and Roman deities, along with some other Hellenistic versions of traditional Egyptian deities like Serapis.

Another type of ceremonial containment of the gems was used for birth or gynaecological reasons. Their simpler forms show only a womb and a key design and seem to lock or unlock the womb solely by persuasive analogy. The more ornate versions, however, surround the womb with an *ouroboros* (Dakkach 2018:242). An example dated to the Late Roman period,³⁴ astonished with more than the single Egyptian deity, adds Anubis, Chnoubis, Bes, Isis and Osiris as guardians on the top of it (fig.35). It generally protects the woman's body from danger. The scene bears striking similarities to a scene from the *Book of Caves* (Piankoff 1954:74-75 & fig.12) where the sun reaches Osiris as he lies within a serpent in the depths of the Duat. There is no question that they were brought together because of their respective roles in the myth of the death and resurrection of Osiris.

Apart from the fertility role of the ouroboros, the iconographical association of the ouroboros with motherhood and maternity is known during the New Kingdom as the representations on terracotta from the 19th Dynasty (fig.36) indicate. A mother and her child at her side appear resting on a slab-like bed with a serpent all around it. It seems to share its powers with the idea of motherhood. The terracotta was destroyed amid the chaos caused by the two world wars' removal and storage of the collections, but was published by Cooper in 1873 (Cooper 1873:63 & fig.107).³⁵ A one-of-a-kind magical gem depicts ouroboros enclosing a naked woman squatting (fig.37).³⁶ The symbol is so comfortably appropriated by the theme of fertility that some womb gems even omit the depiction of deities inside the serpent. In this case, the symbol depicts a woman in childbirth seated on what appears to be a birth chair. The use of the ouroboros around the woman suggests its regular use on amulets made for the living, which became popular during the Roman Period.

³³ It is currently located at the Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung at the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – ÄM 9876.

³⁴ The gem is now in the British Museum, OA.10006.

³⁵ It is previously housed in the British Museum, and the current location is unknown.

³⁶ The gem is now in the British Museum, OA.9861.

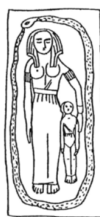


Fig.36 Terracotta depicting a woman and infant lying on bed – now lost
cf. Drawing by Cooper, (1873),
After: Reemes, (2015:fig.55)



Fig.37 Red jasper magical gem
cf. British Museum Online

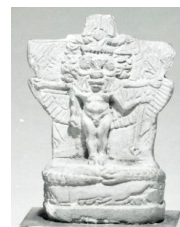


Fig.38: Amulets shows Bes stands on an ouroboros
cf. British Museum Online

According to the study of the ouroboros on magical gems by Dakkach (2018), the serpent does not appear to be randomly distributed among magic gems, but rather is attracted to certain contexts and rejected by others. The depiction of mummy figures and wombs inside the serpent is far more common than that of lions or moons, although the latter are more popular overall. It is also obvious that many Egyptian gods (Osiris, Isis, Anubis, Bes, Khnoum, etc.) often appear in an “ouroboric” context, whereas all their Greek counterparts very rarely do so. It can therefore be concluded that the ouroboros on magical contexts reliefs remains to a certain extent faithful to its Egyptian roots by its low acceptance of foreign influences.

In the British Museum’s magical papyrus, Bes, the familiar figure in Egyptian magic, repels the evil demons by his monstrous appearance. It is supported by an oval that has an ouroboros around it containing several beasts that incorporate the demons: crocodile, snake, lion, hippopotamus, dog, scorpion, and turtle (Assmann 1997:15). Identical to an image that may be found on various Egyptian papyri, another particular amulet (fig.38) is unusual in that it is decorated with an Egyptian design featuring the multiple-winged god Bes and has a place on a platform decorated with the *ouroboros*, who was portrayed among a series of animals.

3-3 Various regular images

The ouroboros appears on sarcophagi and papyri of the 21st Dynasty and continues as long as the Egyptian religion survives during the Greco-Roman period. It is associated with resurrection and the afterlife, which soon embraced within the ancient Egyptian funerary literature as a symbol of rebirth. The solar child may represent the sun's rebirth at sunrise or alternately the scarab, Khepri, who was surrounded and guarded by the ouroboros. Further examples of the former are seen in papyri of the New Kingdom and Late Period. On the funerary papyrus of Hrwbn (fig.39),³⁷ an ouroboros encircles an infant in the solar disc as part of a symbolic scene that incorporates the sun rising. The *ouroboros* which hangs down with the arms of Nut, represents the ability of nonexistence in the void that surrounds the cosmos to regenerate.

Artists of the Greco-Roman period were aware of the ability of Egyptian iconography to represent intricate thoughts of eternity, as do serpent on coffins. The images of the ouroboros are vivid examples of symbolic themes of the iconography of the Late period coffins, they were closely connect with the mysterious underworld

³⁷ The funerary papyrus of Hrwbn in the Egyptian Museum at Cairo, P. Cairo 133/EMC SR 19325.

beings. A coffin³⁸ that dates back to the 21st Dynasty shows such an image from the interior of a coffin, as a twinned mummiform serpent-headed demon crowned with the feathers of *Maat*, and grasping the tails of numerous lizards (*aSA* “many”), surrounded by an ouroboros, represents the massive underworld space within which demons reside (fig.40).



Fig.39: The solar god as a divine infant encircled by the ouroboros cf. Assmann, (2011:fig.6)



Fig.40: Ouroboros surrounds a demon. A coffin now in Cairo Museum (CG 6086) cf. Niwiński & Chassinat, (1996:fig.102)

On a gilded and painted cartonnage mummy-mask³⁹ datable to the Ptolemaic period, the breastplate is decorated with a fine grid which highlights two vertical registers, each divided into five parts; the ouroboros is surrounding a figure of a lying human (fig.41). Also on a painted cartonnage anthropoid mummy-case,⁴⁰ two dog-headed Ouroboros with a folded wing flanked by a standing figure of Osiris, and each surrounding a mummy. While in the lower part, Anubis watches over the mummy surrounded by another Ouroboros, which symbolizes time and the renewal of life (fig.42).



Fig.41: Cartonnage mummy-mask cf. Schweitzer, (1998:fig.7)

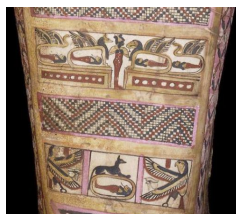


Fig.42: Cartonnage mummy-case cf. British Museum Online.



Fig.43: A column in the Hypostyle Hall of Philae temple cf. on the site.

The depiction of the ouroboros with other guardian creatures was common during the Greco-Roman period. Reliefs in the temples of Philae and Edfu show the serpent in ritual context. On one of the columns of Philae temple's Hypostyle Hall (fig.43), as a part of a scene representing the King presents offerings to Isis, and at its bottom, under the text that explains the scene, the ouroboros appeared to encircle some of the evil symbols (two captives, a turtle and a snake). From the same temple, the creature occurs again in a unique scene at Hadrian's Gate (fig.44). He is represented by an entwined Nile god by a serpent that pours water from two jars, symbolizing the birth of the Nile River, under a group of granite rocks, which refers to the sacred island itself. From this under-island cave near the first cataract, the ancient Egyptians believed the flooding of the Nile started. The image shows the ouroboros as Apophis tries to stop the flood. That explains the reason for representing Horus, who stands as a falcon on the top of the island as a guardian for the Nile god. Assmann

³⁸ The coffin in Cairo's Egyptian Museum, CG 6086.

³⁹ The mummy-mask in the British Museum, EA29782.

⁴⁰ The mummy-case in the British Museum, EA29584.

(2019:27) however, argued that the Ouroboros symbolically flows back into itself stands for the annual flooding of the Nile, which is a key symbol of cyclical time and eternity, which flows back into itself like a circle.

Likewise, within the Greco-Roman Period Kom Ombo temple, two recently uncovered monuments from the temple Kom Ombo temple are carved with figures of the ouroboros. They are now in the Crocodile Museum of the same site. The first is a bronze bracelet (fig.45) in the form of a double raised ouroboros with two heads of a crocodile and a serpent facing one another, which it have no tail. The other monument is an unfinished stela⁴¹ (fig.46) that dates back to the Greco-Roman period; it represents a priest praising the god Sobek in the form of a falcon-headed crocodile with an erected tail in the form of a uraeus.⁴² Sobek appears stepping on a coiled serpent (ouroboros) with an erected head facing the head of Sobek. This double creature is recalls in mind the so called *Ss Ss* creature (fig.47) in the 10th hour of the *Book of Gates* which consists of a crocodile and a serpent fused together in the tail. They are, guardians of the eastern and western gates of the *Duat*, and are often represented above the figure of Apophis.



Fig.44: Emperor Hadrian's Gate - Philae Temple
cf. on the site.



Fig.45: Bronze Bracelet - The Crocodile Museum – Kom Ombo
cf. on the site.



Fig.46: Unfinished stela - The Crocodile Museum – Kom Ombo
cf. on the site

4. Ouroboros in the Byzantine Period and Beyond

In late Antiquity, starting from the Late Roman period till the late era, in the common history of the icon and the beliefs associated with it, it seems that the name "ouroboros" played no significant role. Only a few Greek magical and alchemical literatures from the 3rd and 4th Centuries use the word 'ouroboros' as an adjective; it never refers to time or eternity (Reemes 2015:282). In the 19th century of our common era, some magical texts were discovered in which the writers used the noun ouroboros and its image in their works. By that time, the concept of the ouroboros as a representation of time and eternity was never fully integrated in material culture. In an alchemical text, however, the Alexandrian philosopher Olympiodorus refers to, this kind of serpents as "Agathodaimon," which was considered as the embodiment of the cosmos (Berthelot 1963:80). In general, alchemical texts often describe the Ouroboros as a purifying symbol, which symbolized discharge, cyclical time, and eternity.

Several late antiquity authors used the image of the Egyptian Ouroboros. An image of ouroboros was drawn and written in the 3rd century AD. As part of her investigation into the symbols that were preserved from Hellenistic Alexandrian original that was copied by the Byzantines Period, Cleopatra the Alchemist examined *Chrysopoeia* (fig.48), where she created an image of an ouroboros with its tail in its

⁴¹ It is kind of a votive offering.

⁴² Seems to refer to the god Haroeris, the partner of god Sobek in the same temple.

mouth, surrounds an ancient Greek words that reads “the all is one” (Assmann 2011:2-3). Therefore, this image is occasionally referred to as the Alexandrian ouroboros or the Greco-Egyptian ouroboros. The Cleopatra serpent is composed of two colors: black and white. It is usually linked to the concept of contradicting forces coming together to form a total whole. This type of ouroboros with two colors was common in certain illustrations (figs.10, 12, 49 & 50), where the creature appears to be partially white and partially black, thus representing the qualities of all opposing principles like day/night and good/evil dichotomies.

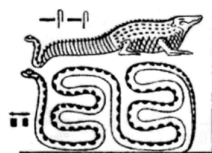


Fig.47: A part of the tenth hour of the *Book of Gates* - alabaster sarcophagus of Seti I cf. Drawing by Bonomi, (1864), After: Reemes, (2015:fig.121)



Fig.48: An ouroboros from Chrysopeia of Cleopatra cf. Berthelot, M. ed. and trans. (1963:132, fig.11)



Fig.49: Papyrus London 121 cf. Preisendanz, (1974:pl.1, fig.4)

A similar example appears in the amulet handbook embedded in *PGM VII* (*PGM* = Preisendanz, 1973-74), which contains short formulae for healing or protection. A lion-headed protective ouroboros is represented as a guardian against demons, sickness, and suffering, figured in the ‘Papyrus London 121’ (fig.49) which dated back to the 3rd Century AD. It is defined as “the name of the great god and his seal” (Reemes 2015:275). It is made up of celestial figures, names, songs, and spells, all encircled by an ouroboros.

An identical idea is also understood by the 5th Century AD. the late classical Byzantine Egyptian scholar, Horapollo,⁴³ (Thissen 2001:2-3) noted that the Egyptians depicted a serpent eating its own tail to represent the concept of cosmos (Berthelot 1963:132 & fig.11; Heinz-Josef, 2001; Assmann 2019:29). In his *Hieroglyphica*, he writes: “they depict a universe-like serpent with its tail in its mouth and the name of the king written in the center of the coils to depict a very powerful king, implying that the king rules over the cosmos” (Horapollo 1999:69). It seems that this old scholar regarded the cartouche as an imitative of the ouroboros.

Conclusion

This article focused on the occurrence, development, and symbolism of the Egyptian *sd-m-ra* or "tail in mouth", which is also known in Greek as "οὐροβόρος", which features as an image of a serpent with its tail in its mouth and gives the specific meaning of the "eternity of time". It is also known by many other names such as the “Tail in the mouth”, the “Many-of-Faces” and the “Great One”.

The Ouroboros controls all undesirable forces in the cosmic which are represented by harmful animals. The frequency of the ouroboros representations on coins, gems, zodiacs, papyri, stelae, coffins, tombs and temples confirm that the ouroboros was a central figure in magical-astronomical contexts.

⁴³ Horapollo wrote two books on hieroglyphics, which were discovered in a 1419 monastery on the Cycladic island of Andros and now in Florence, discussing crudely seventy hieroglyphic symbols.

This myth surrounding the ouroboros' creation is untrue, because of the wide different representation of the creature in the ancient Egyptian monuments. The original ouroboros icon, with its tail in its mouth, was never a singular independent symbol but rather a potential variation among related pictures that might convey the same meanings in multiple ways; like for examples it sometimes appears with or without tail in the mouth, although other examples formed as being with double or multi heads, that are unmistakably related to threatening.

Finding the connections between each monument reveals the types of texts and scenes from much earlier works that were adapted. The appearance of the ouroboros iconography in monuments during the Greco-Roman period lends credence to its function and symbolism. The relative positions of the ouroboros in the zodiac varied according to the astrological setting. The motif was one of many serpent motifs that competed in Hellenistic and Roman period zodiacs. Another mechanism that must have facilitated its adoption, the symbol probably felt prompted by the circular shape of the majority of magic gems, especially because ancient Egyptian magic is pictorial. It emerges from this study that the ouroboros appears on Greco-Roman magic gems in stereotypical scenes inspired by different stages of its long development.

The use of ouroboros as a symbol of protection in ancient Egypt was more widespread than its use for healing purposes. The ancient Egyptians used the Ouroboros to protect themselves and their environment in the form of apotropaic magic. Especially during this period, the ouroboros served an important protective purpose. The living and even the dead were under its supervision. Unusual forms in magical scenes stood for a type of defense against demons for people.

List of Abbreviations

- PM* Porter, B. & Moss, R.L.B. (1927-1995), *Topographical Bibliography of Ancient Egyptian Hieroglyphic Texts, Reliefs and Paintings*, 7 vol., Oxford.
- PL* Wilson, P. (1997), *A Ptolemaic Lexicon, A Lexicographical Study of the Texts in the Temple of Edfu*, Leuven.
- Wb* Erman, A. & Grapow, H. (1962), *Wörterbuch der Aegyptischen Sprache*, 5 vols, Hinrichs' sche Buchhandlung, Leipzig.

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