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### ***Reinterpreting the Griffins of the Middle Kingdom***

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# Reinterpreting the Griffins of the Middle Kingdom

Jake Colloff\*

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## Abstract

In two 2013 articles, Hartwig Altenmüller proposes that the figures on the so-called ‘magical knives’ represent characters from the later Myth of the Sun’s Eye. He further suggests that the griffin depicted on these objects is a zoomorphic form of the syncretised god Shu-Onuris, an idea which is expanded to further explain the contemporary griffins from the tombs at Beni Hassan. Despite numerous flaws, these conclusions have been espoused by various scholars, causing them to adopt a prominent place in the current literature. The present article comprehensively dismembers these arguments, suggesting instead that the griffin is a precursor to a character from the later netherworld texts. Three separate understandings of the different griffins at Beni Hasan are then proposed, based on their varying names and iconography.

**Keywords:** Griffins; Magical Knives; Beni Hassan; Middle Kingdom; Netherworld Books

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## Reinterpreting the Griffins of the Middle Kingdom

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### ***Introduction***

In his two 2013 articles ‘Der Rettende Grief’ and ‘Anubis mit der Scheibe im Mythos von der Geburt des Gottkönigs’, Hartwig Altenmüller proposes that the figures on the so-called ‘magical knives’ of the Middle Kingdom represent characters from the later Myth of the Sun’s Eye.<sup>1</sup> He further suggests that the griffin depicted on these objects is a zoomorphic form of the syncretised god Shu-Onuris.<sup>2</sup> At various points, this understanding has also been implemented to explain the contemporary griffins from the tombs at Beni Hasan.<sup>3</sup> However, serious shortcomings in the evidence give reason to doubt these conclusions in both contexts. Furthermore, the trend of treating all forms of griffin at Beni Hasan as a single entity should be regarded cautiously, as the separate animals possess not only unique names but individual iconographies. To understand these differences, technical descriptions of the griffins at Beni Hasan are provided below, followed by a detailed study of the knives and tombs that shall inform an alternate interpretation of each of these animals.

### *Type 1*

Location: BH3 (Figures 1-2)

Tomb Owner: Khnumhotep II

Egyptian Name: No name attested in BH3.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Altenmüller 2013a, 15-35; Altenmüller 2013b, 11-27.

<sup>2</sup> Altenmüller 2013b, 18-19.

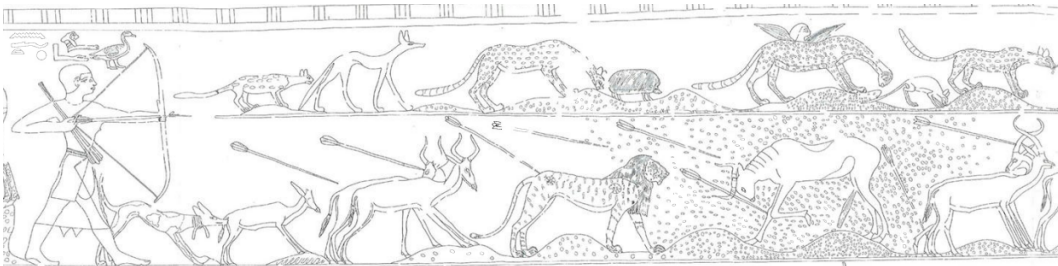
<sup>3</sup> For example: Altenmüller 2013b, 21-22; Sabbahy 2017, 402-413.

<sup>4</sup> Though its name is depicted elsewhere (Voss 1999, 390-398) there is some disagreement over its reading (as discussed later in the text)

Description: This griffin possesses the full head and body of a large feline, likely a cheetah due to its spotted coat (including underbelly) and stripy tail.<sup>5</sup> On its back is a pair of wings, in between which is the head of an Egyptian person,<sup>6</sup> which is attached to the back of the griffin and faces the same direction as the animal. The griffin itself has both its head and tail lowered to the ground.



**Fig. 1.** The griffin from the hunting scene of Khnumhotep II at Beni Hasan (Kanawati 2014, pl.37a)



**Fig. 2.** Facsimile of the hunting scene of Khnumhotep II at Beni Hasan (Kanawati 2014, pl.124)

### *Type 2*

Location: BH15 and BH17 (Figures 3-4)

Tomb Owners: Baqet III and Khety (respectively)

Egyptian Name: *sfr* (attested in both tombs)<sup>7</sup>

Description: This griffin possesses the head of a falcon and the body of a large feline with wings located on the centre of its back. In both scenes its head is raised, and its tail is

<sup>5</sup> Castel 2002, 19.

<sup>6</sup> Altenmüller 2013b, 15.

<sup>7</sup> WB IV, 115/12.

lowered. Morenz claims that the front legs of this griffin (based on the depiction in BH15) end in bull's hooves as opposed to the back legs which conclude in lion's paws.<sup>8</sup> There seems however to be no evidence in support of this, with both the concave curvature of the ankles and the lack of differentiation between the skin of the legs and the keratin hooves suggesting that this is not in fact the case. Morenz may have been interpreting the overhanging digits above the paws as dew claws thus leading him to this conclusion, however they are more likely carpal pads which are not uncommonly depicted on the front legs of large felines in Egyptian art.<sup>9</sup>



**Fig. 3.** The griffin from the tomb of Baqet III at Beni Hasan (Kanawati and Evans 2018, pl.13a)

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<sup>8</sup> Morenz 2002, 24.

<sup>9</sup> See for example: Kanawati and Woods 2010, photo 39.





**Fig. 4.** The griffin from the hunting scene of Khety at Beni Hasan (Kanawati and Woods 2010, photo 207)

### *Type 3*

Location: BH17 (Figures 5-7)

Tomb Owner: Khety

Egyptian Name: *s3(w)g.t* (attested in tomb as *s3wg(.t)*)<sup>10</sup>

Description: The depiction of this griffin at Beni Hasan has the head of a bird, the body of a feline and no visible wings.<sup>11</sup> The underside of the belly is covered in numerous teats and the outwardly erect tail concludes in a lotus flower. There is a checker patterned collar around its neck with a thin line (potentially a leash) attached to it. The colouring of the animal is yellow on all four paws, the forelegs, chest and head, and blue from the back of the forelegs to the end of the tail. On the upper part of the griffin the blue overlaps the collar, continuing until the start of the head, a detail that indicates a cloth draped over the animal. A pattern of vertical and horizontal lines decorates the side of the animal's body starting in-line with the forelegs, possibly also hinting at the presence of some form of clothing.<sup>12</sup>

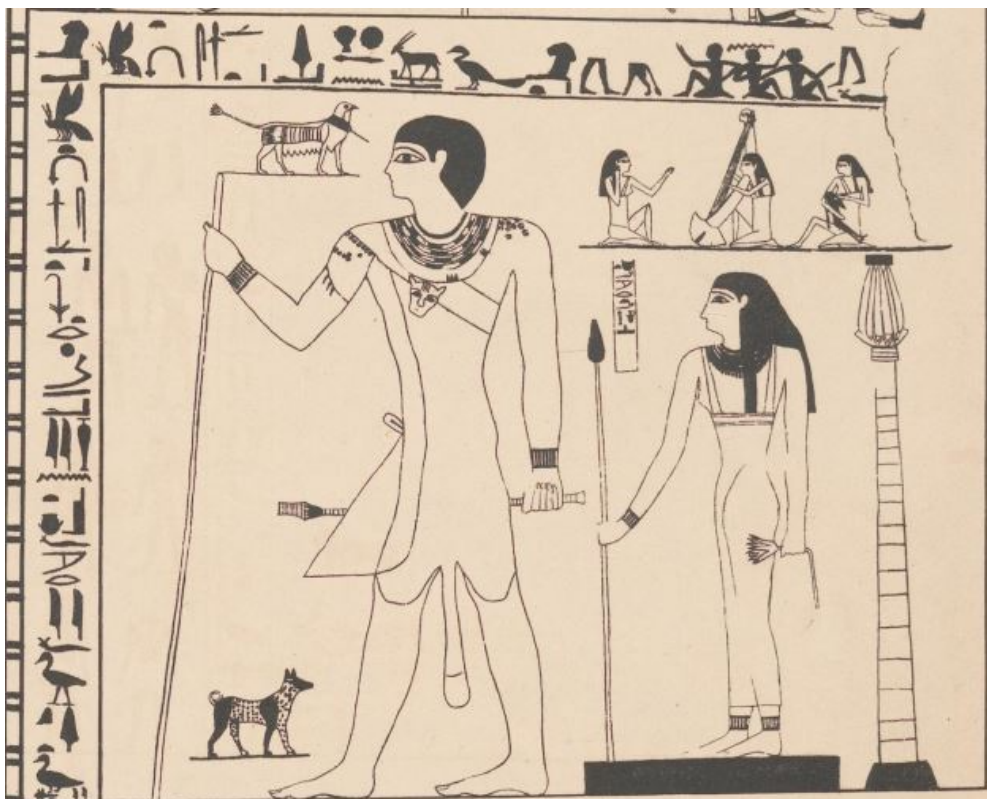
<sup>10</sup> WB III, 422/8. For the common reading of the name as *sA(w)g.t* see: Quack 2010, 350. For an alternative reading the name as *sAw ns.t* see: Morenz and Schorch 1997, 377-379.

<sup>11</sup> Morenz also suggested that the front legs of this griffin ended in hooves (Morenz 2002, 24-25) though this observation can be rejected for the same reasons mentioned above.

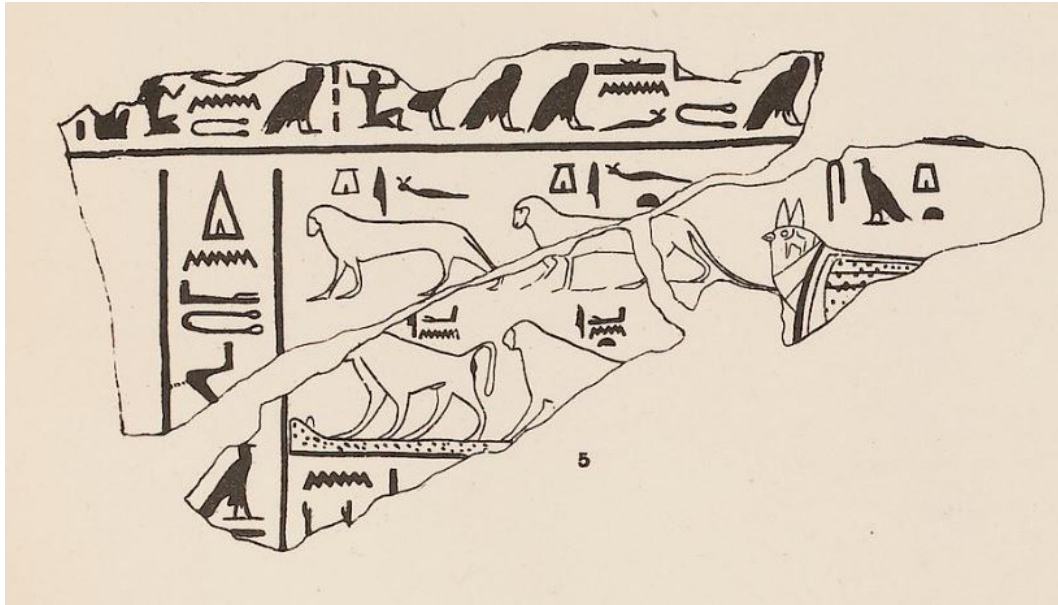
<sup>12</sup> At Barsha, only the head and start of the neck remained at the time of Newberry's facsimile (this is now also lost), however one clear difference from the Beni Hasan version is visible, with the Barsha griffin possessing a pair of pointy ears (Figure 7).



**Fig. 5.** The griffin from the south wall of Khety at Beni Hasan (Kanawati and Woods 2010, photo 208)



**Fig. 6.** Facsimile of the griffin from the south wall of Khety at Beni Hasan (Newberry 1893b, pl.16)



**Fig. 7.** Facsimile of a fragment of a griffin in the tomb of Nehri I at Deir al-Barsha (Newberry and Griffith 1895, pl. 11)

### ***The Magical Knives***

The magical knives of the Middle Kingdom and Second Intermediate Period are found in the archaeological record from around 2000 BC – 1600 BC.<sup>13</sup> Used to draw a protective circle around mothers / new-borns,<sup>14</sup> the purpose of the knives was to bestow protection upon children and mothers, before, during and after childbirth.<sup>15</sup> As a secondary, yet unquestionably related function, these items were also placed in tombs in order to help facilitate divine rebirth in the hereafter.<sup>16</sup> The protective function of these objects was achieved through their decorative scheme, which was comprised of various composite and uniform characters,<sup>17</sup> with Péter Hubai recording 72 different figures,<sup>18</sup> across over 150 unearthed knives.<sup>19</sup> Though no two knives exhibit identical decoration, the creatures and symbols present on them are collectively inherited from an identical repertoire of characters, suggesting that they must have been compiled from either a single or collection of standardised mythologies.

<sup>13</sup> Roberson 2009, 436.

<sup>14</sup> Hayes 1953, 248-249; Ritner 1997, 235.

<sup>15</sup> Quirke 2016, 214.

<sup>16</sup> Altenmüller 1986, 26-27.

<sup>17</sup> The protective aspects of these figures is communicated through passages inscribed on the knives, for example: “Words spoken by The Fighter: ‘I have come so that I may select protection upon Sena-ib, whom the lady of the house Seneb-sema gave birth to, may she live.’” (From Berlin Staatliche Museen object 14207)

<sup>18</sup> The actual number of demons is less than this as, for example, a sitting and striding panther were counted as two different figures despite likely representing the same entity: Hubai 2008, 182.

<sup>19</sup> This figure is now over 200: Vink 2016-2017, 12.



In his original thesis on these artefacts, Altenmüller ascertained a connection between the figures present on the knives and the entourage of the sun god.<sup>20</sup> This correlation enabled him to convincingly argue that the knives served an apotropaic function by means of sympathetic magic.<sup>21</sup> In this proposal, the child represents the sun god whom the entourage protects by repelling evil forces that mean it harm.<sup>22</sup> Subsequently, Altenmüller has advocated a connection between the figures on these knives and those present in the later Myth of the Sun's Eye.<sup>23</sup> Expanding this idea, he argues that the griffins from these knives represents the syncretised god Shu-Onuris who fetches the eye (shown in the form of the head of Atum located on the griffins back) from Nubia.<sup>24</sup> Despite numerous flaws, these latter conclusions have been espoused by various scholars over the last decade, causing them to become one of the most prominent interpretations of these figures in the current literature.<sup>25</sup>

The Sun's Eye argument rests on three fundamental claims: the baboon carrying the wedjat eye represents Thoth carrying the Sun's Eye;<sup>26</sup> the Jackal headed figure shown in close proximity to solar disks should be interpreted as Anubis fetching the solar eye;<sup>27</sup> and the magical knife found in tomb 95.2 at Dra abu al Naga gives the griffin the name *in-hr.t*, the Egyptian term for Onuris.<sup>28</sup> Of these claims, the latter two are most dubious and warrant a detailed discussion below.

In the second claim, Anubis is incorporated into the Myth of the Sun's Eye by being paralled with *'wnš-kwḫ'* (literally meaning 'jackal-monkey') one of the protagonists of the story.<sup>29</sup> However, across all the inscriptional evidence, there seems to be very little corroborating this link. The most supportive construal for this connection comes from translating *'wnš-kwḫ'* as 'jackal named kufi'.<sup>30</sup> This interpretation is however almost unquestionably erroneous due to passages that describe him climbing trees to eat fruit as he looks back towards his homeland, which substantiate the more ubiquitous understanding of *'wnš-kwḫ'* as a primate.<sup>31</sup> This notion was recently reaffirmed by Luigi Prada's argument that the equivalent character in the Greek version of the text can be translated as 'monkey', as opposed to its previous reading of 'lynx'.<sup>32</sup> Additionally, after the two characters (*'wnš-kwḫ'* and the Sun's Eye) reach Thebes, *'wnš-kwḫ'* is thereafter only referred to as *kwḫ'* (monkey).<sup>33</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Altenmüller 1965, 136-177.

<sup>21</sup> Altenmüller 1965, 178-187.

<sup>22</sup> Altenmüller 1965, 178-187.

<sup>23</sup> Altenmüller 2013a, 19ff; Altenmüller 2013b, 17ff; Altenmüller 2015, 24ff.

<sup>24</sup> Altenmüller 2013b, 16-22.

<sup>25</sup> Liptay 2015-2016, 42; Quirke 2016, 356; Vink 2016-2017, 15. Altenmüller and others have also used this theory to interpret certain griffins at Beni Hasan and Deir al-Barsha: Altenmüller 2013b, 21-22; Sabbahy 2017, 402-413.

<sup>26</sup> Altenmüller 2013a, 21-22.

<sup>27</sup> Altenmüller 2013a, 22.

<sup>28</sup> Altenmüller 2013b, 18-19.

<sup>29</sup> Altenmüller 2013a, 22.

<sup>30</sup> For this understanding see: Smith 1984, 1083; West 1969, 162.

<sup>31</sup> Smith 1984, 1083; Quack 2010, 342.

<sup>32</sup> Prada 2014, 111-114.

<sup>33</sup> This happens in both the Greek and demotic versions: Quack 2010, 342.

Jacqueline Jay suggests that perhaps *wnš-kwf* is a wild form of the domesticated *kwf*-ape,<sup>34</sup> which is linked with the ‘cynocephalus’ baboon.<sup>35</sup> Finally, Joachim Quack reveals that on the Leiden papyrus (P. Leiden I 384, 22/12) this character is revealed to be the son of Thoth,<sup>36</sup> while on the temple inscriptions he almost exclusively represents Thoth himself, often accompanied by Shu, but never Anubis.<sup>37</sup> Therefore, despite the existence of various textual accounts of this myth, there seems to be no literary records substantiating Altenmüller’s paralleling of these two figures.

Another unconvincing proposal relates to the magical knife from tomb 95.2 at Dra abu al Naga, which constitutes the only document where the name of the griffin is provided.<sup>38</sup> Though the inscriptions are somewhat dilapidated, Voss (who published the original report on the piece) reads this name as *tp.ty idb.wy* ‘First of the Two Banks’ or *tp.ty t3.wy* ‘First of the Two Lands’.<sup>39</sup> Altenmüller on the other hand, through a manipulation of the partially erased glyphs, argues that they read *in-ḥr.t*, the Egyptian name for the god Onuris.<sup>40</sup> This reading however appears questionable as it relies on changing every glyph from Voss’s original transcription without sufficient basis. Whilst an updated publication of the knife would perhaps help to resolve this issue, until such a time one cannot justifiably accept this new interpretation.

Further reasons to doubt this connection may arise when considering the dating of the myth. The first full literary record of this story appears in a demotic papyrus from the second century AD, over two thousand years after the earliest of the magical knives.<sup>41</sup> Whilst it is clear that the original story predates this time, following many Egyptian stories that existed orally before they were captured in writing, there is doubt regarding whether the myth dates far enough back to be contemporary with this corpus of objects.<sup>42</sup> This suspicion is reiterated in a statement by Quack who expresses the opinion that “its core is definitely rather late for ancient Egypt, not before the first millennium BC”.<sup>43</sup> Whilst Jan Assmann and Georges Posener respectively argue that precursors to the core or certain fables from within the core of the story, can be seen during the New Kingdom,<sup>44</sup> not only

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<sup>34</sup> This is based on the passage that talks about *wnš-kwf* not wanting “to leave his southern homeland, in which he is said to live “free under the sky in the trees” Jay 2016, 226.

<sup>35</sup> Smith 1984, 1083.

<sup>36</sup> Quack 2010, 342.

<sup>37</sup> Quack 2010, 342.

<sup>38</sup> Voss 1999, 396.

<sup>39</sup> Voss 1999, 395-396.

<sup>40</sup> Altenmüller 2013b, 18-19.

<sup>41</sup> Chronology based on: Shaw 2000, 483.

<sup>42</sup> Gerke 2014, 41.

<sup>43</sup> Quack 2010, 341.

<sup>44</sup> Assmann argues that the ‘Moscow mythological story’ is a late eighteenth dynasty forerunner to the core: Assmann 1985, 48. Whilst Posener connects a fragment of a story on the Ramesside ostrakon ‘O. Deir el-Medina 1598 I’ with the fable of the two jackals: Posener 1978, 78.

are both of these interpretations questionable,<sup>45</sup> but certain independent fables probably predate the core regardless.<sup>46</sup>

Finally, Altenmüller himself identifies a complication with his argument that he fails to resolve: the fact that Onuris has never otherwise been documented as a griffin.<sup>47</sup> Whilst one of Onuris's known forms is that of a falcon,<sup>48</sup> and various other falcon deities take the appearance of a griffin,<sup>49</sup> in no other known cases is Onuris's appearance in this form substantiated.<sup>50</sup>

An alternative understanding of the griffin can be fashioned from a hypothesis posited by Erik Hornung, who identifies similarities between this beast and a serpent deity depicted in the fifth and eleventh hours of the 'Book of Amduat'.<sup>51</sup> The first of these scenes shows a three headed winged serpent with a human head on its tail, and the falcon-headed god Sokar standing between its wings (Figure 8).



**Fig. 8.** Facsimile of section from the fifth hour of the Amduat (after Piankoff and Rambova 1954, fig. 78. Reproduced by permission of the Natacha Rambova Archive, Yale University)

The name of the snake is *nṯr-ꜣ-wpi-dnhwy-sꜣb-šwt* “The great god who spreads (his) wings, colourful of plumage”, the last portion of which was often used in the epithets of avian

<sup>45</sup> Assmann's conclusion is refuted upon lack of evidence by Baines and Jay (Baines 1996, 160; Jay 2016, 227), whilst Posener's hypothesis is contested by Jasnow (Jasnow 1991, 209).

<sup>46</sup> Jay 2016, 233. Note that another proposed depiction of this myth from the New Kingdom can be seen on Berlin Ostrakon 21443. For an overview of the discussion surrounding this piece see: Braun 2020, 209-217.

<sup>47</sup> Altenmüller 2013b, 19.

<sup>48</sup> Altenmüller 2013b, 19.

<sup>49</sup> In an Old Kingdom griffin from the valley temple of Sahure the griffin is linked with the likes of Horus and Soped: Borchardt 1913, pl.8.

<sup>50</sup> Altenmüller 2013b, 19.

<sup>51</sup> Hornung 1963, 106, 175.

deities.<sup>52</sup> In the eleventh hour the snake appears again, though pictured slightly differently with four legs and a sun-disk crowned god grabbing its two wings (Figure 9).



**Fig. 9.** Facsimile of the winged snake from the eleventh hour of the Amduat (after Piankoff and Rambova 1954, fig. 86. Reproduced by permission of the Natacha Rambova Archive, Yale University)

In this instance there is an accompanying text which reads:

He exists in this fashion.

When this god calls to him, the image of Atum comes forth from his back.

Then he swallows his images afterwards.

He lives from the shades of the dead, and his corpse (also lives from) the heads.<sup>53</sup>

This passage indicates that the figure holding the wings is the ‘image of Atum’ who lives hidden in the snake’s body and rises from its back when called forth by the sun god.<sup>54</sup> If we take this snake to represent a later version of the *tp.ty idb.wy*, the head rising from the griffin’s back should be understood as the ‘image of Atum’ (or a proto form thereof) which is depicted due to the animal’s proximity to the sun god.

<sup>52</sup> Hornung 1963, 106.

<sup>53</sup> Darnell and Darnell 2018, 226.

<sup>54</sup> Hornung 1963, 175.

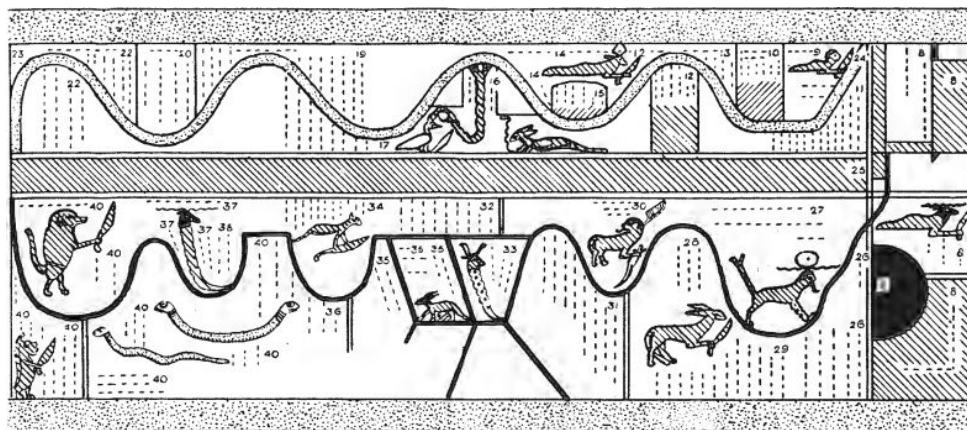


Further evidence solidifying the connection between the griffin and this snake deity is visible in a scene from the late twenty-first dynasty mythological papyrus of Bakenmut. This papyrus portrays a six-legged winged snake with the head and torso of a man protruding from between its wings, an almost exact replica of certain griffins from the magical knives (Figure 10).<sup>55</sup>



**Fig. 10.** Winged snake with bust arising from its back from the mythological papyrus of Bakenmut (Piankoff 1957, pl. 20)

In more recent times, articles have developed this connection by analysing various figures from the knives and their use in later underworld texts.<sup>56</sup> These appearances occur for the first time in the Book of Two Ways where certain common demons protect paths and doorways in the hereafter (Figure 11).<sup>57</sup>



**Fig. 11.** Demons from the magical knives protecting doorways in the book of two ways (De Buck 1961, plan 1)

<sup>55</sup> Gerke 2014, 44.

<sup>56</sup> See: Liptay 2011, 149-156; Roberson 2009, 427-445.

<sup>57</sup> Hermsen 1991, 137.

In a text from the twenty first dynasty (Louvre Pap. 3110), this connection is even more apparent, as various figures from the knives such as the bipedal hippo and frog goddess appear in tandem with the aforementioned snake deity.<sup>58</sup> Not only does this reaffirm the role of certain prominent apotropaic demons within the netherworld texts, but also directly links this winged snake to them. This evidence together markedly supports the conclusion that many of the figures on the knives are precursors to characters from the later netherworld books, who help the sun god in his nightly journey so that he may successfully undergo (re)birth.

Whilst there is certainly a link between these apotropaic characters and the figures from the later netherworld texts, caution in directly equating the named deities in these images to the Middle Kingdom griffin should be advised. This is due to the large span of time between the Book of Amduat and the early knives, which may have allowed for an evolution of the iconography in the same way that the griffin gave way to a snake.<sup>59</sup> The later incorporation of the apotropaic figures into the netherworld books however is unlikely coincidental, and so we may understand them as having retained their religious significance into this time.<sup>60</sup> One should therefore recognise the griffins on the knives as a demon of the solar entourage, who aides the sun god in his voyage through the hereafter. This is done to aid the rebirth of the sun god and by extension the new-born connected with the knife. The presence of the head between the wings of the griffin indicates the presence of the sun god, which the infant of course embodies.

One complication regarding this theory relates to the few examples in which the heads on the griffins display spurts of blood.<sup>61</sup> Quirke compares these examples to later cursed figurines,<sup>62</sup> stating that the motif is used in a projective manner to prevent “the possibility of any force becoming inimical, rebelling against the creator.”<sup>63</sup> These, along with several griffins that are depicted with no heads between the wings at all, are anomalies in the context of the entire corpus of knives.<sup>64</sup> Such deviances may have been rendered intentionally or unintentionally depending on how comprehensive the mythology surrounding these beings was at the time. If intentional, they likely serve a similar purpose to the severed heads of the enemy that are also shown on these knives, which likely act in the way which Quirke describes.

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<sup>58</sup> See Liptay 2011, fig. 5.

<sup>59</sup> Gerke 2014, 45.

<sup>60</sup> Liptay 2011, 153-154.

<sup>61</sup> Altenmüller 2013b, 14; Quirke 2016, 355.

<sup>62</sup> For examples of these blood-jets in the cursed figurines see: Posener 1958, 256. Similarly to the griffins, these figures can depict Egyptians (as well as foreigners): Koenig 2007, 224.

<sup>63</sup> Quirke 2016, 355.

<sup>64</sup> Both those lacking heads and the head’s spurting blood are vast minorities: Gerke 2014, 143-171.

### ***The Griffins of Beni Hasan***

Of all the known tombs dating to the Middle Kingdom, griffins have been found in the decoration at only two different sites: Beni Hasan and Deir al-Barsha.<sup>65</sup> As these sites are contemporary with the magical knives, the Sun's Eye argument has been used to understand many of these griffins, especially those from the tombs at Beni Hasan. Having rejected his theory, separate ideas shall be posited here, based on the context and iconography of each individual piece.

#### *The tp.ty idb.wy Griffin*

The *tp.ty idb.wy* griffin (following Voss's reading of the name) is an exact replica of those from the magical knives except for its feline, as opposed to avian, head. This griffin occurs once in the funerary record, within the tomb of Khnumhotep II at Beni Hasan (BH3),<sup>66</sup> located in a hunting scene on the first register on the eastern side of the North wall, facing east (Figure 2). The griffin (which occurs unnamed in this scene) is located in front of a bowman titled 'Son of the local prince *nh.t*', however his arrows seem only to be falling on creatures of the second register. The posture of the griffin is not aggressive (both tail and head are lowered) and it is not engaging with any of the other animals around it.

In her comprehensive analysis of this scene, Janice Kamrin concludes that the insertion of Khnumhotep II and his children as hunters, is intended to reflect Khnumhotep in the role of the king, as previous Old Kingdom and early Middle Kingdom hunting scenes from private tombs never show the owner actively participating in the hunt (as opposed to royal tombs which do).<sup>67</sup> When these scenes occur in the royal sphere, the king is identified with Horus who pacifies the animals of the chaotic desert (which represent enemies of the gods), thus bringing order to the cosmos.<sup>68</sup> Furthermore, Kamrin recognises that many of the animals share a solar theme, leading her to conclude that the scene overall acts as a metaphor for the journey of the sun god through the netherworld, with the hunted animals representing the enemies of this god.<sup>69</sup> As the griffin in this scene is not a subject of the hunt, this understanding corroborates well with depictions on the knives where the griffin is a member of the solar entourage, who helps to protect the sun god on his nightly journey.

Though some scholars reject any connection between the griffins of the magical knives and the nobles' tombs,<sup>70</sup> a damaged yet comparable scene from the twelfth dynasty tomb of Iti-ibi-iqer at Asyut reaffirms this correlation by repeating various other common figures.<sup>71</sup> In

<sup>65</sup> For an overview and dating of the tombs at Beni Hasan see: Shedid 1994, 26-29, 32-36, 53-66. For dating the Barsha tombs see: Willems 2014, 79-98.

<sup>66</sup> For original publication of the tomb see: Newberry 1893a, 39-72. For the most recent publication see: Kanawati 2014.

<sup>67</sup> Kamrin 1999, 87-88. She also notes that whilst Khnumhotep doesn't wear a SnDw.t kilt in this scene (which is the attire usually donned by the king) some other Middle Kingdom nobles do, for example: Blackman 1915, pl. 8.

<sup>68</sup> Kamrin 1999, 88.

<sup>69</sup> Kamrin 1999, 89.

<sup>70</sup> For example: Gerke 2014, 49.

<sup>71</sup> El-Khadragy 2007, 111-112, 125.

the first register of this scene, a large baboon is present, following a spotted leopard / cheetah. Unfortunately, only the rear end (tail and back legs) and a small portion of the neck of this creature is still visible, however the posture and species make it possible that this originally depicted a griffin. Discarding speculation, the second register shows a frontal facing figure who can undoubtedly (despite the loss of the head) be identified as ḥꜣ ‘the fighter’. This repetition of figures across multiple sites significantly weakens any denunciation of a connection between the hunting scenes and the figures from the apotropaic knives. Given this connection, it seems reasonable to postulate that these figures on the walls act in a similar way to the knives when they are placed in tombs, that is to say, they protect the tomb owner who sympathetically represents the sun god, thus aiding his safe rebirth. In essence then, the griffin should be understood as a protective demon who accompanies the sun god through the underworld, enabling the rebirth of the sun each day and by extension, symbolically assisting the rebirth of the tomb owner in the afterlife.

### *The sḥr Griffin*

The *sḥr* griffin is found twice at Beni Hasan in the tombs of Baqet III and Khety (BH15 and BH17 respectively).<sup>72</sup> On both occasions the *sḥr* griffins are depicted in a hunting scene on the first register on the western side of the north wall, facing east. In the tomb of Baqet the *sḥr* griffin is fronted by a Seth Animal and trailed by a serpopard whereas in the tomb of Khety the same three animals appear in opposite order. In both tombs these animals are located behind an active bowman and are neither being hunted nor are they attacking any lesser animals.

The Sun’s Eye argument avers that these scenes illustrate the tomb owners, together with real and mythical animals, tracking the Sun’s Eye and slaughtering enemies of the sun god as sacrifices along the way.<sup>73</sup> The alternative name of this beast is elucidated on account of it not having yet located the Sun’s Eye, as seen through the fact that no head is present between its wings.<sup>74</sup> In addition to the previous arguments rejecting his interpretation, the orientation of this scene is inconsistent with a depiction of this myth. In both tombs the hunting scene is depicted on the northern wall despite the Sun’s Eye having fled to Nubia in the south. This contradicts the ancient Egyptians’ careful orientation of art to reflect ‘real world’ geography, and further diminishes the strength of this argument overall.<sup>75</sup>

A starting point for the interpretation of this animal can be obtained through its etymology. The name *sḥr* is most likely a derivative of the term *sḥf* ‘to be warm / hot’ as seen through passages in the Coffin Texts:<sup>76</sup>

<sup>72</sup> For the original publication of the tombs see: Newberry 1893b. For the most recent publication of tomb 15 see: Kanawati and Evans 2018.

<sup>73</sup> Altenmüller 2013b, 22.

<sup>74</sup> Altenmüller 2013b, 22.

<sup>75</sup> It should be noted also that the Beni Hasan and Asyut scenes all move from west to east, following the same direction that the sun barque moves through the netherworld.

<sup>76</sup> Translations after: Morenz and Schorch 1997, 372, 374.



CT VII, 222 k-m:

I am your father/image in the midst of your *hym*-shrine; after I have given the *srf* to the throne of heaven, after I have repeated your Ba-shape by your (outer) strength.

CT V, 67 d-f:

I divide / judge the court among the shining ones(?) as the *srf* enters, as the *srf* leaves.

Notably in the first instance, the determinative for the term *srf* is a four-legged creature,<sup>77</sup> whilst the second example contains a double determinative comprised of a brazier (Gardiner Q7) and a seated god figure (Gardiner A40).<sup>78</sup> Together these determinatives confirm the link between this beast and a deity connected with heat and warmth.

On account of these associations, perhaps the most sense can be made of this depiction by seeing it as another manifestation of a demon from the solar entourage following Kamrin's interpretation of the similar scene in the tomb of Khnumhotep II. Though different from the *tp.ty idb.wy* griffins without this human head on their back do occur on the magical knives (as mentioned above), and the *sfr*'s presence alongside the Seth Animal and serpopard which also both feature recurrently on the magical knives buttresses this conclusion. This of course summons questions surrounding the different nuances between the *sfr* and the *tp.ty idb.wy* which occupy similar contexts and iconographical meaning, yet were undoubtedly distinct figures in the Egyptian mind. Unfortunately, answers to such questions require additional data, and thus one can only conclude that the *sfr* must not contain the 'image of Atum' and is therefore a separate creature that nevertheless possesses solar connections.

### *The sꜣ(w)g.t Griffin*

The *sꜣ(w)g.t* griffin, following the common reading of the name, is found in both the tomb of Khety at Beni Hasan (BH17) and Nehri I at Deir al-Barsha (Barsha 4).<sup>79</sup> At Beni Hasan the griffin is found on the eastern half of the south wall facing west, positioned at eye height in front of a large depiction of the tomb owner who faces east (Figure 6). At Deir al-Barsha the griffin is positioned behind a pair of gif monkeys and a pair of *in*-baboons, each made up of a male and a female (Figure 7).

In this instance, the connection between the *sꜣ(w)g.t* and the Myth of the Sun's Eye was posited by Lisa Sabbahy, who links it to the griffin that "swathes himself for you (Hathor)

<sup>77</sup> Morenz and Schorch 1997, 372.

<sup>78</sup> Morenz 2002, 29.

<sup>79</sup> For the original publication of the tombs see: Newberry 1893b, 51-62; Newberry and Griffith 1895, 29.

with his wings”<sup>80</sup>. Even if the connection between Middle Kingdom griffins and this myth was accurate, which has been disputed above, the Egyptian word for ‘griffin’ in this instance is *sfr* which is referred to using the male pronoun ‘*f*’, making this connection (with the female *s3(w)g.t* griffin) undoubtedly erroneous.<sup>81</sup>

The *s3(w)g.t* likely depicts a tamed version of the griffin due to its collar and close proximity with Khety himself at Beni Hasan, and portrayal behind two forms of domesticated ape at Deir al-Barsha.<sup>82</sup> Whilst some such as Gerke reject this idea due to the desert context at Barsha,<sup>83</sup> and the possible non-original context of the animal at Beni Hasan,<sup>84</sup> others expand this argument, claiming that the *s3(w)g.t* is in fact a dog dressed to look like a griffin.<sup>85</sup> It has even been proposed that this disguise would transform an ordinary hunting dog into a ceremonial and ferocious hunting dog, at the same time increasing the prestige of the owner.<sup>86</sup> A few pieces of evidence do lend some traction to this theory, as both the teats on the Beni Hasan griffin and the pointed ears on the Barsha griffin are more reminiscent of canine as opposed to leonine qualities.<sup>87</sup> Despite this, the argument remains unconvincing, especially when one considers the lack of parallels for disguising animals in ancient Egypt.<sup>88</sup> However if true, this interpretation of the decoration inducing ‘ferocious’ qualities in the otherwise regular hunting dog can be dispelled on account of her swollen teats. Very rarely if at all are active hunting dogs depicted with lactating teats in Egyptian art, a fact which is reiterated in a tentative comparison to modern wild dogs for which hunting whilst lactating is not natural behaviour.<sup>89</sup>

The most credible understanding of this animal originates with von Bissing’s observation that the griffin, as well as the ‘nurse, singer and harpist’ who appear behind the depiction of Khety, all stem from an earlier and separate draft of the scene, thus linking the two representations together.<sup>90</sup> The musicians here are comparable to those from the Old Kingdom which allude to the temporary return of the deceased to this world.<sup>91</sup> Though wet nurses are not usually incorporated into such scenes, they do often appear in settings of (re)birth (sometimes shown holding apotropaic knives)<sup>92</sup> which the returning of the

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<sup>80</sup> Sabbahy 2017, 404. For quote see: Quack 2010, 348.

<sup>81</sup> Transcription and transliteration can be seen in Darnell 1995, 80.

<sup>82</sup> Barta 1973-74, 341; Meeks 2001, 505.

<sup>83</sup> Gerke 2014, 54.

<sup>84</sup> von Bissing and Montet were both of the opinion that the griffin was part of an original scene which predated the current one: von Bissing 1904, 110-111; Montet 1911, 17.

<sup>85</sup> This thought was originally posited by Davies 1933, 28.

<sup>86</sup> Meeks 2001, 505.

<sup>87</sup> Of these two features the teats are slightly less compelling as there exist New Kingdom examples of feline sphinxes with swollen teats (Gardiner 1953, pl. 1), however there also exist winged griffin-like canids with pointy ears which may have originated from this practice if it did exist (Crowfoot and Davies 1941, pl. 20)

<sup>88</sup> Gerke 2014, 51.

<sup>89</sup> Creel and Creel 2002, 72; For a general overview of dogs (including their role as hunters) in Egyptian antiquity see: Brewer 2001, 28-48.

<sup>90</sup> von Bissing 1904, 111; Vasiljević 2003, 435.

<sup>91</sup> Nurses can also be shown playing instruments in such scenes: Vasiljević 2003, 435.

<sup>92</sup> Altenmüller 1983; Altenmüller 1987.

deceased fulfils.<sup>93</sup> One ought therefore to understand the *s3(w)g.t* as achieving the same core function as the other griffins in facilitating rebirth, though the means by which this occurs is clearly different.<sup>94</sup> This understanding also corresponds best to the symbolic aspects of this griffin whose lotus tail and swollen teats are signs of fertility and (re)birth.

### **Conclusion**

This work advocates that the figures on the magical knives do not represent those from the Myth of the Sun's Eye, but rather portray demons from the solar entourage concerned with ensuring the safe passage of the sun god through the netherworld. By ensuring the rebirth of the sun god, these objects encourage the safe birth of infants (or rebirth of the deceased, in funerary contexts) due to a sympathetic link between the two. Such an understanding can also be applied to the griffins of Beni Hasan, who aid the rebirth of the tomb owner in the afterlife through solar connections. Despite their identical core purposes, each of the separately named griffins has its own particular nuances reflected in both its title and iconography.

In the netherworld texts, a serpentine deity which evolved from the *tp.ty idb.wy* griffin appears. This presents an understanding of the griffin as a figure who ensures an uninhibited rebirth of the sun god each night. This same purpose is attained through the magical knives and in the tomb of Khnumhotep II, with the new-born and tomb owner symbolically inhabiting the position of the solar deity in order to aid their own (re)birth. The head protruding from the back of this animal belongs to a being which lives within the griffin and rises up between its wings when in propinquity with the sun god. In later texts the head or bust is referred to as the 'image of Atum' and the being itself is connected with the god Sokar, however it is impossible to say whether these connections were already present during the Middle Kingdom.

The *sfr* griffin seems to serve a similar role as the *tp.ty idb.wy* due to its appearance in similar hunting scenes, as well as its association with the Seth Animal and serpopard which both feature regularly on the magical knives. There must however have been a difference in the Egyptian understanding of these beings as not only does the *sfr* possess a different name from the *tp.ty idb.wy*, but also a different anatomical representation. The *sfr* is composed in both instances without a head between its wings and therefore can be said not to encapsulate this 'image of Atum'. Possibly the *sfr* can be understood as a powerful animal whose profile, as a deity linked with heat, fitted the role of a member of the solar entourage.

Overall, the evidence seems to support the idea of the *s3(w)g.t* griffin as being a 'tame' animal, though the conclusion that it represents a dog in costume is unjustified and otherwise unprecedented. This griffin accomplishes its rejuvenative purpose through layers of rebirthing iconography, with the swollen teats and lotus tail being pointed symbols of

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<sup>93</sup> Vasiljević 2003, 435.

<sup>94</sup> Vasiljević 2003, 435.

fertility and fecundity. This interpretation is ultimately solidified through the animal's connection with nurses and musicians in its original context.

**Abbreviations:**

ACE Reports = Australian Centre for Egyptology Reports

ANEG = Ancient Egypt: The History, People and Culture of the Nile Valley

ASAE = Annales du Service des Antiquités de l'Égypte

ASE = Archaeological Survey of Egypt

ÄSL = Ägyptologische Studien Leipzig

BIFAO = Bulletin de l'Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale

BMHBA = Bulletin du Musée Hongrois des Beaux-Arts

BMMA = The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin

CENiM = Cahiers Égypte Nilotique et méditerranéenne

CHANE = Culture and History of the Ancient Near East

DFIFAO = Documents de Fouilles de l'Institut français d'archéologie orientale du Caire

JEA = Journal of Egyptian Archaeology

JEOL = Jaarbericht van het Vooraziatisch-Egyptisch genootschap "Ex oriente lux"

LÄ = Lexikon der Ägyptologie

MDAIK = Mitteilungen des deutschen archäologischen Instituts Abteilung Kairo

MKS = Middle Kingdom Studies

OBO = Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis

OLA = Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta

PAe = Probleme der Ägyptologie

SAK = Studien zur Altägyptischen Kultur

SAK Bh = Studien zur Altägyptischen Kultur - Beihefte

SIE = Studies in Egyptology

TeG = Tuna el-Gebel

TdE = Trabajos de Egiptología

WA = Writings from the Ancient World

WdO = Die Welt des Orient

WVDOG = Wissenschaftliche Veröffentlichungen der Deutschen Orientgesellschaft



ZDMG = Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft

ZPE = Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik

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