

A lasting bond: on a transferred death ritual from ancient Cynopolis

UN VÍNCULO DURADERO: SOBRE UN RITUAL DE MUERTE TRANSFERIDA EN LA ANTIGUA CINÓPOLIS

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Abstract This paper seeks to analyse two groups of reddish wax magic figurines discovered in the cemetery of the ancient city of Cynopolis and preserved at the Antiquities Museum of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, with the aim of offering a critical and updated exegesis of these exceptional magical artefacts from Roman Egypt. By analysing features including material, colour, morphology and iconography, and by examining the effigies alongside parallel rituals, I argue that this ensemble should be best understood as a ‘transferred death ritual’, whose aim was to ensure an effective death and the sending of the deceased to the underworld.

Keywords Figurines, magical-religious practices, iconography, materiality, Graeco-Roman Egypt.

Resumen En el presente artículo se analizan dos grupos de figurillas mágicas de cera procedentes del cementerio de la antigua ciudad de Cinópolis, que se conservan en el Museo de Antigüedades de la Biblioteca de Alejandría. El objetivo principal reside en ofrecer una interpretación crítica y actualizada de estos excepcionales artefactos del Egipto romano. A través del análisis de cuestiones como el material, el color, la morfología e iconografía, y de la comparación de las efigies con otros paralelos rituales, se plantea que el significado de este conjunto se comprende mejor dentro de los denominados “rituales de muerte transferida”, cuyo propósito era la muerte efectiva de las víctimas y su traslado al inframundo.

Palabras clave Figurillas, prácticas mágico-religiosas, iconografía, materialidad, Egipto greco-romano.

1. INTRODUCTION

«Then found they Odysseus, dear to Zeus, and round about the Trojans beset him, as tawny jackals in the mountains about a horned stag that hath been wounded»

(Hom. *Il.* 11. 473-475, ed. Murray, 1928, pp. 515-517).

The image of jackals depicted in this passage of the *Iliad* (and in 13, 102-104) as predatory and scavenging animals was well known in Antiquity (Lewis and Llewellyn-Jones, 2018, pp. 344-347). The representation of these canids and their character is one of most remarkable aspects of the magical ensemble to which I devote my attention in this article.

During the excavations conducted in 1978 by the Inspectorate of Antiquities of Egypt at Beni Mazar, the location of the cemetery of the ancient city of Cynopolis (El-Sheikh Fadl), two groups of reddish wax figurines were uncovered inside an inverted vessel (Haggag, 2004, p. 231). The objects are currently held in the Antiquities Museum of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina (inv. num. 599, 600 and 601 for the pot, group of jackal and woman, and pair of jackal and man, respectively). Unfortunately, any further data about the precise archaeological context of these pieces are unknown, depriving scholars of essential information for understanding the use of these figurines in magical-religious ceremonies. Lacking the precise archaeological and stratigraphic record, the magical set has been dated by Mona Haggag (2004, p. 232) on stylistics and formal grounds of the bowl and its clay used for the pot between the end of the 4th and the end of the 6th century AD.

The assemblage consists of two groups of anepigraphic reddish wax figurines found inside an inverted bowl (22 cm in diameter) (fig. 1) along with a rectangular shard, the symbology of which will be discussed later. The first (11.5 cm) (figs. 1 and 2) consists of a supine woman, with her arms and legs tied behind her back and a cavity in the abdomen. A recumbent jackal is standing on top of her with its front legs on her chest, in a conspicuous dominant and submissive position. Meanwhile, the second (10.5 cm) (figs. 1 and 3) depicts a man, also in a supine position, with his arms stretched out close to his body and his sexual organ erect, being devoured by a jackal who is attacking him in the neck. The lower extremities of the man are joined to those of the animal and its tail, seemingly merged into one.



Figure 1. Two wax statuettes of jackals crouching on female and male effigies, found inside an inverted ceramic bowl © Bibliotheca Alexandrina Antiquities Museum, inv. num. 599, 600 and 601 / Photo by Christoph Gerigk.

2. REMARKS ON THE MATERIAL AND COLOUR

With regard to the materials employed, both were made of wax, probably mixed with resin or a pigment such as minium (*miltos* in Greek), which gave them a striking reddish hue. However, this view is based entirely upon the photographs, courtesy of the BA Antiquities Museum, since no analysis, such as gas chromatography or Fourier-transform infrared spectroscopy (FTIR), has been performed to determine the organic components of the material. Although wax was often used to fashion magical figurines throughout Antiquity, it was employed particularly widely in Pharaonic and Roman Egypt. One of the most significant examples of the use of wax effigies in magical practices can be found in the ‘Harem Conspiracy’ against king Ramses III of the 20th Dynasty during of which the suspects were accused of making wax models to affect the power of king’s personnel (Goedicke, 1963; Ritner, 1993, pp. 192-201; Pinch, 1994, pp. 94-95). In addition, the Papyrus Salt 825 from the Ptolemaic period contains directions for modelling wax figures of enemies in order to destroy them (Derchain, 1965; Fermat, 2010).

Wax is the material most frequently mentioned by Graeco-Roman written sources, particularly Imperial authors, for making anthropomorphic wax figurines. For instance, Horace (S. 1. 8. 30-33) and Ovid (*Ep.* 6. 91-94) recreate the actions of the witches Canidia and Sagana, as well as Medea, crafting and then using these wax artefacts (*cf.* also Soph. *Rhizotomoi* F536; Pl. *Leg.* 11. 933b; Theoc. *Id.* 2. 28-31; Hor. *Epod.* 17. 76; Verg. *Ecl.* 8. 80-81; A. 4. 507; Ov. *Am.* 3. 7. 30, and Pseudo-Callisthenes, *Life of Alexander* 1. 1; 5). It is also worth mentioning that until the discovery of the Fountain of *Anna Perenna* and her nymphs in Rome, magical wax poppets from the western provinces of the Empire were only documented in the aforementioned written sources (Guida and Talarico, 2002, pp. 53-57; Rapinesi and Polakova, 2002, pp. 39-45; 2012, pp. 175-182; Piranomonte, 2005, pp. 100-103; 2010, pp. 204-207; 2015, pp. 79-81; Sánchez Natalías, 2015, pp. 194-202).

However, thanks to literary and epigraphic evidence (*SEG* IX, 4; 72), we know that these effigies were also made of wax in ancient Greece, although due to the properties of the material and the conditions of preservation, none have survived. In fact, in the fourth century BC the philosopher Plato (*Leg.* 11. 933b) narrates that the placing of images molded in wax on the tombs of ancestors, at crossroads and at the doors of houses was an ordinary practice in the city of Athens (Gager, 1992, pp. 249-250, Num. 141; Ogden, 2002, pp. 22-23, Num. 16; Wilburn, 2019, pp. 485-486).

Several decades ago, M. Raven (1983) observed that wax was used in magical and religious ceremonies in ancient Egypt in both Pharaonic and Roman times for symbolic and practical reasons. Chosen for its physical properties, wax did not corrode or shrink unless subjected to pressure, and it had excellent malleability, particularly when mixed with oil and fat (Raven, 1983, pp. 28-29; Faraone, 1991b, p. 7). When considering symbolic motivations, its degree of combustibility must be considered: the elimination of the flames produced by the burning of wax figures during the execration rituals could symbolise the control and annihilation of the cursed enemies (Raven, 1983, p. 29).

Regarding the colour of the wax of these artefacts, it is worth noting the significance of the symbolism of red, which is quite powerful in magical practices (Griffiths, 1972, pp. 81-90; Pinch, 1994, p. 81; Pinch, 2001, pp. 182-185; *cf.* Pastoreau, 2017, esp. pp. 12-53 for an overview of the history of red colour from earlier times to the end of Antiquity). Through a brief examination of the varied uses of red in the ancient Egyptian culture and mindset we are able to understand the symbolism that surrounded the creation of the Cynopolis ensemble (*cf.* DuQuesne, 1996a, pp. 14-23). Colours in magical-religious prac-

tices were carefully chosen, and their selection was in accordance with ritual criteria. The symbolic use of this colour is characterised by a constant ambivalence (DuQuesne, 1996a, pp. 16-17) since «*red is not only good or bad, favourable or unfavourable; it is also exciting and moving, and through its affinities to a number of substances it has invited frequent employment in sympathetic magic*» (Griffiths, 1972, p. 82). Indeed, red represents the colour of menstrual blood and fire, elements that can be both beneficial and harmful. That said, red could symbolise life and regeneration and, in turn, the hostile forces of chaos (Pinch, 1984; 2001).

Before carrying out the examination of the positive and negative aspects of red, it is valuable to note the following aspects. First, that red and deep dark brown were the colours with which the skin tone of Egyptian men was painted, without acquiring any adverse connotation (Griffiths, 1972, p. 87). Second, that in the writing of Egyptian religious texts red is sometimes used to indicate sections of documents, e.g. headings (cf. Kees, 1943, p. 447). Indeed, as Posener warns (1949, p. 78), in the Pyramid Texts the use of red ink is functional and is also used for writing the name of gods, kings, and the deceased. As for the favourable aspects, we should bear in mind one of the most renowned and powerful Egyptian amulets, the wadjet eye, a charm that was frequently depicted with a red dot in the corner (Pinch, 2001, p. 184). Likewise, the goddesses Hathor and Sekhmet are described in some magical texts dressed in bright red linen garments (*LdSD* 164; Allen, 1974, p. 160, spell 164; Pinch, 2001, p. 184; cf. Kees, 1943, pp. 463-464).

We can now turn to the negative associations of red, in which the god Seth is the centre of much of the symbolism. First, the basic word for red, *dšr*, is directly linked to the word for wrath or fury (Lefebvre, 1949, p. 75). It is a well-known fact that in ancient Egypt the desert was understood as *dšrt*, the 'red land', dominated by Seth and the demons, a place opposite to *kmt*, the 'black land' (Kees, 1943, pp. 457-458; Te Velde, 1967, pp. 111-116). At this point we cannot overlook that Plutarch relates that Egyptians conceived of Seth as red-skinned (*De Is. et. Os.* 30; 31; 32F). Leaving aside the question about the period of Egyptian history during which the god Seth was associated with this colour, modern scholars accept that from the Late Period onwards, red was linked with this divinity and his followers (Kees, 1943, p. 456; Griffiths, 1972, pp. 83-84; Pinch, 2001, p. 184).

Now that the symbolism of the colour red has been addressed, we can delve into its relation to aggressive magic. The use of red ink for writing in execration rituals is attested to the end of the Middle Kingdom, a period in which we find a series of statuettes of captives from Saqqara containing lists of malefic forces identified with Apophis written in red (Posener, 1949, p. 77). In fact, this colour is preferred for writing the names of demons such as Seth and his enemies (Ritner, 1993, p. 147). Moreover, some recipes of the Graeco-Egyptian magical formularies (*PGM* I, 262-347=*GEMF* 31; *PGM* IV, 2359-2372=*GEMF* 57; *PGM* IV, 3172-3208=*GEMF* 57; *PGM* VII, 540-578=*GEMF* 74; *PGM* VII, 593-619=*GEMF* 74; *PGM* VIII, 64-100=*GEMF* 72; *PGM* XII, 14-95=*GEMF* 15) prescribe using lamps which are not coloured red in order to avoid the Sethian or Thyphonic influence or the connotations of this colour on magical practice (Mastrocinque, 2007, pp. 93-94; Zografou, 2010, pp. 279-280; Piranomonte, 2015, p. 76; Diosono, 2020, pp. 141-142). This colour, according to Dieleman and Sarischouli (*GEMF* 15.66-68/*PGM* XII 19-39, 2022, p. 75, note 64), was due to the red ochre, which comes from the minium pigment in which lamps were dipped before they were lit.

The prescription of making models of Apophis and Seth in red wax is documented in the Pharaonic era (Raven, 1983, p. 26). For instance, according to R. Ritner (1993, p. 147, n. 663) although Faulker confuses in the Bremner-Rhind Papyrus III the word 'red' with

‘corpse’ and translates ‘waxen body’, red wax figurines of Apophis are probably ritually destroyed in the *Book of Overthrowing Apep*:

This spell is to be spoken over (a figure of) ‘Apep drawn on a new sheet of papyrus in green ink, and there shall be made (an image of) ‘Apep with waxen body with his name inscribed on it in green ink, to be put on the fire that he may burn before Rē when he manifests himself in the morning, at noon-tide, and also in the evening with Rē sets in the West (...). (Faulkner, 1937, p. 168).

A potential example of making the figurines of enemies with reddish wax can be found at the military fortress of Mirgissa, Nubia, which was constructed in the 12th Dynasty. In the third of the deposits documented at the site, which constituted a bastion against the Nubian peoples to the south of Egypt, a skull of a Nubian buried on top of a pot was unearthed. Traces of red wax were found around the aforementioned head, which have been interpreted as the decomposition of reddish wax effigies that were melted during the cursing ceremony (Vila, 1963, pp. 135-160; 1973, pp. 625-639, esp. p. 631; Ritner, 1993, pp. 153-180; Wilburn, 2019, pp. 467-468).

Little can be said from an archaeological perspective about the use of red in the fabrication of wax poppets during the Roman period. From the set of magical figurines made of wax from Roman Egypt documented to date, only the two specimens from Cynopolis have a reddish colour. We also find that the male and female pair of embracing wax effigies (*symplegma*) which are held in the Staatliches Museum Ägyptischer Kunst in Munich (inv. num. ÄS 6791) have a dark orange hue (Faraone, 1991a, p. 204, num. 28a; Brashear, 1992, pp. 79-109, plate 12). However, it is likely that their original yellowish tone has darkened over time.

The same happens if we move our gaze to the textual record. Ovid is the only classical author who records the existence of a ritual artefact with these features, namely a red wax magical figurine. In *Am.* 3. 7. 27-38, the elegiac poet describes an unpleasant experience of love: the sexual impotence by which he was surprised in an encounter with a young and beautiful *puella* (Gager, 1992, pp. 250-251, num. 142; Sharrock, 1995, pp. 152-180; Ogden, 2002, p. 126, num. 99; Hanses, 2022, pp. 249-283). Ovid wonders if that fateful and embarrassing event is due to an act of witchcraft. In fact, he describes three ritual procedures through which the *saga* could inflict impotence upon him. One of them is a red wax figurine inscribed with his name and pierced with thin needles in the liver (*sagave poenicea defixit nomina cera et medium tenues in iecur egit acus*), an organ considered by the ancients to be the seat of emotions (Hom. *Il.* 24. 212-213; Soph. *Aj.* 938; cf. Collins, 2008, pp. 327-328).

The in-depth analysis of the recipes of the Graeco-Egyptian magical papyri that command the manufacture and use of magic figurines, both anthropomorphic and zoomorphic, reveals a surprising variety of types of wax prescribed for their elaboration: wax or clay from a potter’s wheel (PGM IV, 296-466=GEMF 57), wax and resin (PGM IV, 1872-1927=GEMF 57), unbaked dough or unmelted wax (PGM IV, 2943-2966=GEMF 57), Etruscan wax (PGM IV, 3125-3171=GEMF 57; PGM XII, 14-95=GEMF 15), unsmoked beeswax (PGM CXXIV, 1-43=SM 97=GEMF 83), orange beeswax (PGM IV, 2359-2372=GEMF 57), and beeswax that has not been heated, which is known as bee glue (PGM IV, 2373-2440=GEMF 57). However, in just one case it is specified to use red wax: PGM XIII 310-319=GEMF60, a dream-sending spell that prescribes making a hollow hippopotamus out of red wax following the instructions below (cf. Ritner, 1993, p. 146, esp. n. 663):

Make a hippopotamus of red wax, hollow, and put into the belly of this hippopotamus both gold and silver and the so-called ballatha of the Jews and array him in white linen and put him in a pure window and, taking a sheet of hieratic papyrus write on it with myrrh ink and baboon's blood whatever you wish to send. Then, having rolled it into a wick and using it to light a new, pure lamp, put on the lamp the foot of the hippopotamus and say the Name, and he sends [the specified dream]. (Morton Smith, 1986, p. 181, *apud* Betz).

Finally, there is a large deposit of animal and human bones and bone-like objects that have been painted red at Karanis, in Fayum (Egypt), of between the 3rd and the 5th century AD, which may have been employed for a magical purpose. The artefacts were found in two closely situated contexts dated to the 4th century AD and painted with a red substance (probably ochre, discovered near the site) with a design of dots and both straight and undulating lines, which in certain cases resemble pseudo-writing. A. Wilburn (2012, pp. 140-160, pl. 3) has raised a range of possibilities regarding the functionality of this ritual. One relates to the types of bones recovered, many of them from medium-sized and large mammals such as pigs, cows, horses, goats, and dogs (*cf.* Wilfong and Ferrara, 2014, pp. 112-113). Comparing the representation of domestic animals that were part of the execration rite of Mirgissa, mentioned above, he wondered if they could have been part of a ceremony against a farmer's livestock. However, although the author finally argues due to the lack of parallels in contemporary rituals that the data are too scarce to determine the purpose of the spell, these bone deposits constitute a fine example of red-painted artefacts presumably used in an act of ritual power in late-antique Egypt.

3. A SYMBOLIC TRANSFERRED DEATH RITUAL?

M. Haggag (2004, p. 238) suggested in her article three different explanations of the aim of this assemblage, all of them linked to the sphere of erotic and reproductive magic and perpetrated by a violent jackal: from a husband who discovers his beloved's infidelity and kills her, also taking his own life, through the jealousy of an infertile woman who decides to reduce the reproductive capacity of another female, to a man who, having been rejected by a woman, decides to end the life of her husband and cause her infertility. Although it is tempting to interpret these objects as part of an erotic magical practice since the male figurine has an erect phallus, M.-A. Pouls Wegner (2007, p. 147) has offered an alternative scenario. In her view, this ithyphallic physiognomy could correspond to that of victims of suffocation by strangulation and hanging, probably due to the predatory behaviour of the jackal, who is attacking his neck savagely. Nevertheless, these hypotheses are difficult to verify as these objects were not recovered with a text, on either a sheet or a papyrus, that specified or alluded to the reason for their manufacture.

On another note, the city from which this magical ensemble comes from deserves attention. The Greek town called Cynopolis, which means 'town of dogs' (Κυνόπολις), was at times the capital city of the 17th nome of Upper Egypt (Montet, 1961, pp. 164-171, esp. pp. 166-167). The tutelary deity of the Cynopolitan nome was originally a jackal goddess whom the Ptolemaic texts identify as Anupet, the wife of Anubis (DuQuesne, 2005, pp. 273-274). In this regard, «Anupet may have been a doublet of the god or possibly an *Ur-form* of his» (DuQuesne, 2005, p. 402). However, the aforementioned nome was later associated with Anubis who was worshipped there. Anubis was probably one of the best known of the Egyptian jackal gods. In fact, known for being an embalmer and protector

of dead and to perform other functions, was a divinity which played a central role in the Egyptians' understanding of death and also in funerary rituals (for a comprehensive treatment of Anubis in earlier periods, see DuQuesne, 2005, pp. 367-384, and for the Ptolemaic and Roman times, cf. Grenier, 1977 and Durisch Gauthier, 2002). Therefore, it would be reasonable to think in the first instance that the existence of a local jackal god cult in Cynopolis might have influenced the significance of the ritual itself (Pouls Wegner, 2007, p. 147) but the lack of information regarding this topic makes it impossible to prove this hypothesis.

In the same vein, seals have been documented in the royal necropolis of the New Kingdom from the Valley of the Kings in which a jackal deity –identified with Anubis– is depicted recumbent on the prisoners (Daressy, 1902, p. 65, num. 24109, pl. XVIII; cf. p. 37, num. 24089) and also in the Tutankhamun's tomb, where the seals show an image of a jackal and, in the majority of cases, nine bound enemies that does not include any personal name (Kaper, 1993, pp. 139-177, esp. pp. 165-175, cf. seals E-G and I-L). However, I consider that the jackals from Cynopolis would not represent a jackal deity or to be a manifestation of it as occurred in the above-mentioned seals, but rather animals attacking their prey (on jackal deities and its cults see, especially, DuQuesne, 1996b; 2005; 2012; Wilfong, 2015; on Egyptian animal cults see, amongst others, Fitzenreiter, 2003; Ikram, 2005; Colonna, 2021).

Without discarding the interpretations proposed to date, and regardless of whether the nature of this magical operation is in fact erotic, I consider that this group is best understood within the framework of the so-called 'transferred death rituals' or 'symbolic homicide', a term coined by F. Marco Simón (2009, pp. 165-180, esp. 172). This constituted a lasting and unwavering bond between the target and the infernal powers, a kind of magical ceremony in which the jackals are the key component.

According to Ch. Faraone's view (1991b), the objective of Greek *defixiones* (κατάδεσμοί) was originally defensive in nature, including the binding of the target, his inhibition, subjugation and immobilization or the restriction of his activities, but not his destruction. Many of these spells would have been made in agonistic contexts as 'preventive measures' against an enemy and in anticipation of future defeats. A complementary framework for the analysis of Greek curse tablets is that of E. Eidinow (2007), who considers that on several occasions these texts constitute the expression of responses to cultural perceptions of fear. However, Marco Simón (2009, pp. 165-180) has documented other magical practices that, beyond the 'fixation' or 'immobilization' of the victim, had as their effective purpose the demise and transfer to the underworld of the victim mentioned in the text or to the one the figure embodies, in a phenomenon known as the 'transferred death ritual'.

In addition to *defixiones* in which the burial of the victim is requested (SGD 49) and in those texts in which the death of the target is literally claimed (DT 129=SD 92; DT 228; SGD 115; SD 530), this ritual was also carried out with certain Graeco-Roman magic figurines. First, we have the case of those found inside miniature lead coffins whose burial symbolizes *similia similibus* that of the targets they embodied (cf. an alternative reading in Curbera 2015, p. 107). For instance, one lead figurine of the late 5th century BC and three male effigies of around 430 BC found in two graves from the *Kerameikos* (SA 40 and hS 193) were placed inside their own lead box (Archaeological Museum of Kerameikos, inv. num. IB 3-5 and 12. Trumpf, 1958, pp. 94-102; Schlörb-Vierneisel, 1966, p. 38; Jordan, 1988, pp. 274-275; Faraone, 1991a, p. 201, num. 5 and 6; Stroszeck, 2019, pp. 361-362; 2021, pp. 28-29, fig. 3). Second, we have the deliberate mutilation of vital body parts such as the case

of the lead figurine from a grave in Attica that is missing its head (Wünsch, 1902, p. 27; Faraone, 1991a, p. 201, num. 7).

It is within this magical horizon that the findings of Cynopolis must be contextualised. The female figurine does not have an abdomen, probably consumed by the jackal, and consequently lacks vital organs including the liver as well as the reproductive system, while the male effigy is attacked in the neck by the other jackal (cf. Dosoo, 2022, pp. 163-164), in an act that could be deadly (figs. 2-3). A further component that could indicate that this set must be understood as a 'ritual of transferred death' is the shape of the bowl in which the ensemble was placed. As can be appreciated in fig. 1, the pieces were found inside an inverted pot that has a rectangular opening from the top edge. This deliberate design is, in my opinion, reminiscent of a roughly domestic construction, a *domus aeterna* in which the spirits of the targets would rest throughout eternity.

In addition, this arrangement of the container hiding the effigies in a concealed place would make them impossible to recover, thereby avoiding any chance of the spell being deactivated, a common fear among the practitioners of magic in ancient Rome (Alfayé Villa, 2016, pp. 109-152). In short, the jackal would be acting here as an anthropophagous animal –and perhaps a scavenger– in an anticipated staging of the death of the targets. Even more, it is redundant that the objects were found in a cemetery, a sacred place where these animals used to roam at night in search of food (Lewis and Llewellyn-Jones, 2018, p. 344), since it suggests an accumulation of elements related to death.

Finally, I would not want to rule out the possibility that the jackals were actually attacking an enemy of Egypt rather than specific individuals. From the Protodynastic period to Roman times the motif of the 'bound prisoner' constitutes a central theme of the Egyptian art which commemorates and symbolically reinforces pharaoh's victory over the enemies (Ritner, 1993, pp. 113-119). A derived topic that is frequently present in the framework of mortuary themes in particular is the one of the trampling underfoot of the foes (Ritner, 1993, pp. 119-142; Pinch, 1994, p. 85, fig. 44). In this respect, it is worth mentioning the decoration of the wooden sandals from Tutankhamun's tomb, on the soles of which have been depicted the traditional enemies of the state whom the king symbolically trod underfoot every step (Edwards, 1976, unnumbered plate; Veldmeijer, 2011, pp. 87-94, fig. 3.43; cf. also Ritner, 1993, p. 120, fig. 6a). We also find on the Ptolemaic and Roman cartonnage footboards human figures bound within the outline of the sandal soles to «ensure the victory of the deceased over his potential enemies in this world and the next» (Ritner, 1993, pp. 120-122; on Ptolemaic-Roman cartonnage footcases with



Figures 2 and 3. Lateral views of the Cynopolis magic figurines © Bibliotheca Alexandrina Antiquities Museum, inv. num. 600 and 601 / Sherif Badran and M. Sobby.

prisoners, see Simpson, 1973, pp. 50-54, plates 3 and 4; cf. also Corcoran, 1995, pp. 53-55). Thus, it would not be unreasonable to think that though this ‘transferred death ritual’ and within the framework of mortuary themes, the intention of the magical user was to harm Egypt’s opponents and not a series of specific individuals.

Although there is no clear parallel for the assemblage from Cynopolis, it can fruitfully be compared to a wax figurine (7.1 cm) donated in 1972 to the Département des Antiquités égyptiennes du Musée du Louvre (inv. num. E 27079), whose precise archaeological context is unknown. Dating from the Ptolemaic or Roman period (Vandier, 1972, pp. 93-94, figs. 9a-9b; Étienne, 2000, p. 49; 106, num. 105), it represents a dog trampling and devouring the head of a man with some cavities on his body, lying on his back and tied by a linen cord contemporary with the time of the figurine, which constrains the target and reinforces the idea of immobilization both physical and symbolic (fig. 4)

The aforementioned wax figurine constitutes the most exact iconographic parallel known to date for the Cynopolis group and especially for its male effigy. Although the figurine preserved in the Musée du Louvre typologically represents a dog and not a jackal –or perhaps it is indeed a jackal since its body is quite elongated, but the person who made it may not have had the required artistic skills–, it was also placed on top of a male figurine. The canid is biting his neck and head, and it would previously have attacked his stomach, as suggested by the cavity in this area.

When thinking of a man being attacked by an animal, a piece from the 4th century AD found in *Fons Annae Perennae* comes to mind (Museo Nazionale Romano, inv. num. 475550). The effigy (7.5 cm) (figs. 5 and 6), fabricated around a bone and made of wax and polysaccharides, represents an individual in the act of being gulped down by a snake which is coiling itself around its body. The figure is covered by a bronze sheet fixed with two iron nails at the belly and the feet, engraved with *charâkteres*, the Greek letter theta (θ) and a human mask with one of the nails driven through it (Guida and Talarico, 2002, p. 53; Rapinesi and Polakova, 2002, pp. 42-43; Piranomonte, 2010, pp. 207-208). According to the iconography described, the practitioner of magic could have been inspired to make this poppet by the icon of Osiris’s mummy rolled up in the coils of a snake, as Sánchez Natalías (2015, p. 200) has pointed out (cf. also Sánchez Natalías, 2020, pp. 113-117, Martín Hernández, 2021, pp. 111-116; Marco Simón and Sánchez Natalías, 2022, pp. 15-34, esp. 26-32).

The poppet was deposited in a container made of three lead cylinders placed one inside the other, like ‘Russian dolls’, of which only the innermost was inscribed with a curse (inv. num. 475549). The short spell is divided into two columns, in the middle of which there is a standing male figure who could be identified as the victim of the incantation, surrounded by symbols and the Greek θ (cf. Sánchez Natalías, 2020, pp. 113-122). These containers could have served to lock in the victim’s image to bury the target symbolically, and to act as writing bearers (Sánchez Natalías, 2015, pp. 196-197).

In short, although the two aforementioned examples present iconographic differences with the figurines discussed



Figure 4. Wax dog devouring a man © Musée du Louvre, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais, inv. num. E 27079 / Christian Décamps.



Figures 5 and 6. Roman magic figurine of a man being gulped down by a snake © Ministero della Cultura, Museo Nazionale Romano, Terme di Diocleziano, inv. num. 475550 / Luciano Mandato.

here, in both rituals there was a symbolic transfer of the targets, through the action of an animal, to their final destination of death, as we are proposing occurred in the case of the effigies from Cynopolis, in which the jackals carry out this irrevocable and violent activity.

4. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The preceding pages have offered a new interpretation of two groups of Egyptian reddish wax magical figurines, discovered in the ancient cemetery at Cynopolis, that had previously only been conceived as part of a ritual of an erotic nature. However, I also consider that through their iconography the fate of the targets is anticipated. On the one hand, the female effigy lacks an abdomen, probably eaten by the jackal, depriving it of vital organs; while, on the other hand, the male figurine lies prey to the other jackal, which attacks him in the neck, causing him to suffocate. Thus, a reinterpretation of the iconography of the ensemble, in which the jackals are the major factor, raises the possibility that these were really objects that were used to seek the effective deaths of the victims. Lastly, as discussed above, the use of the red colour was especially suitable for aggressive magical practices. Red, associated with Seth and his followers and also related to blood and death, is the colour of the both groups of magical effigies discussed here, which was likely selected with the aim to reinforce the Sethian or Typhonic influence on the curse.

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