



The God with the Upraised Arm



An astronomical archetype of the ancient Near East?

by *Greg Taylor*

In the depictions of mythological scenes on Near Eastern archaeological monuments and artefacts, a number of 'archetypal images' are apparent. One of the most intriguing of these is the 'God with the Upraised-Arm', which can be found in scenes from Egypt, right through the fertile-crescent to Anatolia. In Egypt it is apparent from the time of unification onwards, seen in identical depictions which capture the god-pharaoh in the act of smiting his enemies. The Narmer Palette (Fig. 1) is often seen as a historical depiction of the unification of Upper and Lower Egypt.¹ The image of King Narmer, wearing the white crown of the south and smiting an enemy commonly held to be a northerner, is cited as evidence that he was the unifier of the two lands.² This became a standard picture of the king throughout the



Fig.1: The Narmer Palette

history of Egypt (see Fig. 2), whether the king holds a mace, a spear or even a bowstring in his right hand.

The respected scholar of ancient civilizations, Henri Frankfort, saw this as not only a scene showing a decisive historical battle, but also as a representation of the king as the divine ruler. He asserts that the real meaning of the scene is that the king's victory represents the "reduction of chaos to order",³ an important pre-occupation with the ancient Egyptians;⁴ chaos assumed many forms: death, drought, invading enemies – and these were all seen as manifestations of the god Seth.⁵ It was the pharaoh's job, as the earthly incarnation of the god Horus, to overpower Seth/chaos and maintain the established order. This is obvious from ancient Egyptian texts. For example, in the *Cosmology of Abydos* we find the following passage describing the triumph of Horus over Seth:

Dignity has been set in place, honesty has been established through his laws, evil has departed, wickedness is gone, the land is at peace under its lord.⁶

If the Narmer Palette scene is thus considered a symbolic representation of Horus defeating Seth, we would expect to see

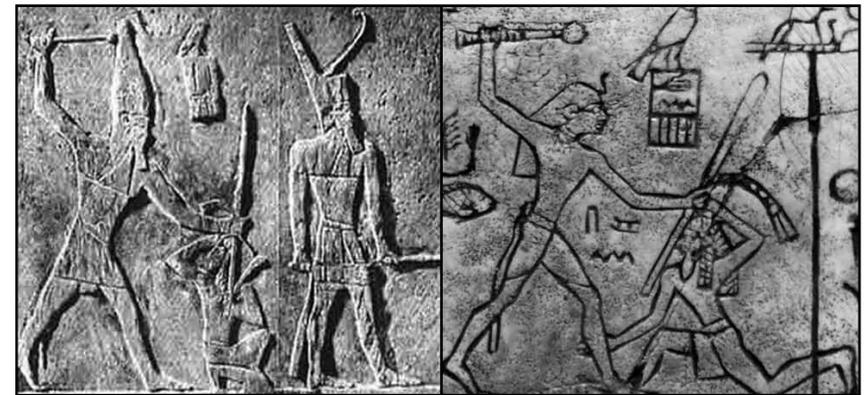


Fig.2: Depictions of King Den and King Sekhemkhet

similar representations explicitly showing these gods battling. There is ample evidence of this and, importantly, certain elements such as the ‘upraised arm’ of the god seem to hold great significance.

At the Temple of Edfu there is an abundance of imagery concerning the contendings of Horus and Seth. On approaching the temple one is immediately met by huge images on the pylons of the king in ‘smiting pose’ in the presence of his archetypal forebear, Horus. Inside the temple can be found the dramatic text *The Triumph of Horus*, with illustrated scenes which were enacted by the Egyptians in an annual drama. Dated to approximately 110 BCE, the story has ancient antecedents, originally appearing in feasts and texts from the earliest dynasties almost three thousand years past.⁷ The drama concerns the harpooning of Seth by Horus (ten times, a symbolic detail which might perhaps shares a common origin with the ten decapitated bodies on the Narmer Palette), after which Horus is crowned the King of Upper and Lower Egypt. Again, Horus is depicted with his arm raised (Fig. 3), this time harpooning Seth (represented by a hippopotamus).

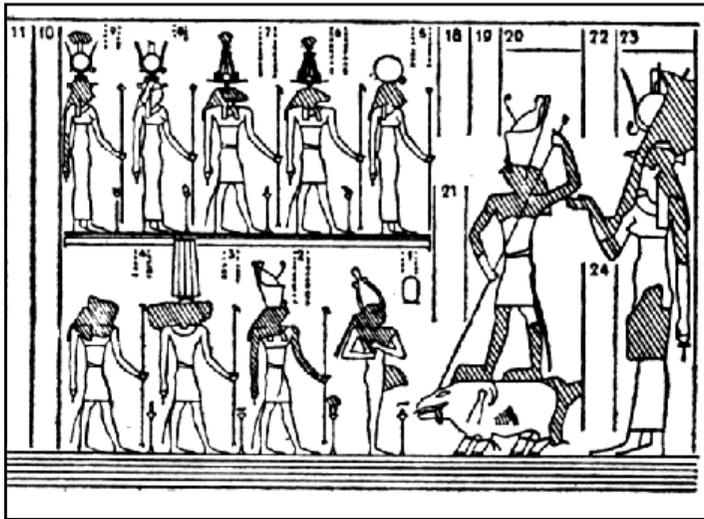


Fig.3: *Triumph of Horus*: Horus Harpooning Seth (Source: Fairman 1974)

That this pose is not simply incidental is confirmed by the explicit naming of Horus in the text as “Him-with-the-upraised-arm”.⁸ This was originally the epithet of Min (a rather obvious association, see Fig. 4), the early Egyptian god of rain and fertility (the latter again a rather obvious association, ahem!). He is often pictured with an upraised arm holding what is thought to be a thunderbolt. Horus and Min became increasingly identified as one and the same during the Middle Kingdom, although Min was already associated with the Pharaoh at least as early as the 4th Dynasty. On the verso of the Stela of Sobek-iry is found the Hymn to Min, which includes the verse “I worship Min, I extol arm-raising Horus”.⁹ The overall impression is that the upraised arm of Min-Horus was considered to be a characteristic pose of vital importance.

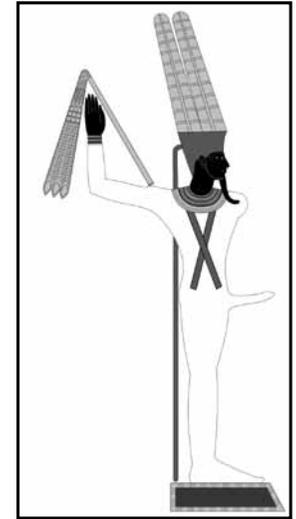


Fig.4: Min

THE CHIEF OF HEAVEN

Another crucial point to emerge from the *Triumph of Horus* is that Horus was the “Great God, Lord of the Sky”,¹⁰ a quote which is followed by the passage “we grant strength to thine arm”. There are numerous other references implying that Horus is to be looked for in the sky; for example “the gods of the sky are in terror of Horus”.¹¹ Perhaps significantly, Min in pre-Dynastic times was also a sky-god called the “Chief of Heaven”.¹² This raises the question of whether the archetypal image of Horus and Min has its origin in the sky. A look at the astronomical ceilings of Senmut and Seti I would appear to confirm this. On Senmut’s ceiling



Fig.5: Astronomical ceiling of Seti I (Source: Parker 1974)

there is an almost identical depiction of Horus as at Edfu, with the arm upraised in the act of harpooning Seth (represented as the constellation Meskhetiu).¹³ There is also an unidentified individual in the same pose amongst the group of constellations at the lower part of the image, this time harpooning a crocodile (another incarnation of Seth). He appears almost identically on the Seti I ceiling (Fig. 5). Thus the ‘God with the Upraised Arm’ may be considered a constellation recognisable by the ancient Egyptians. The obvious question therefore, is which one?

The outstanding candidate to fit the description is the constellation of Orion (Fig. 6), at the very least on sheer resemblance. This constellation was well known to the Egyptians, mentioned in the *Pyramid Texts* in connection with the stellar destiny of the “resurrected pharaoh”. For example, in Utterance 442 we find “Lo, Osiris has come as Orion”.¹⁴ That Osiris is seen as Orion is not considered a problem to the thesis currently under discussion; Egyptian gods had multiple and overlapping associations – Orion was also thought to be incarnate in the Moon and the Nile, and ancient Egyptian cosmologies often contain seemingly contradictory concepts.¹⁵

Turning our attention to Horus, we find evidence in Plutarch’s *Isis and Osiris* of a connection with Orion: “the soul of Isis is called Sothis

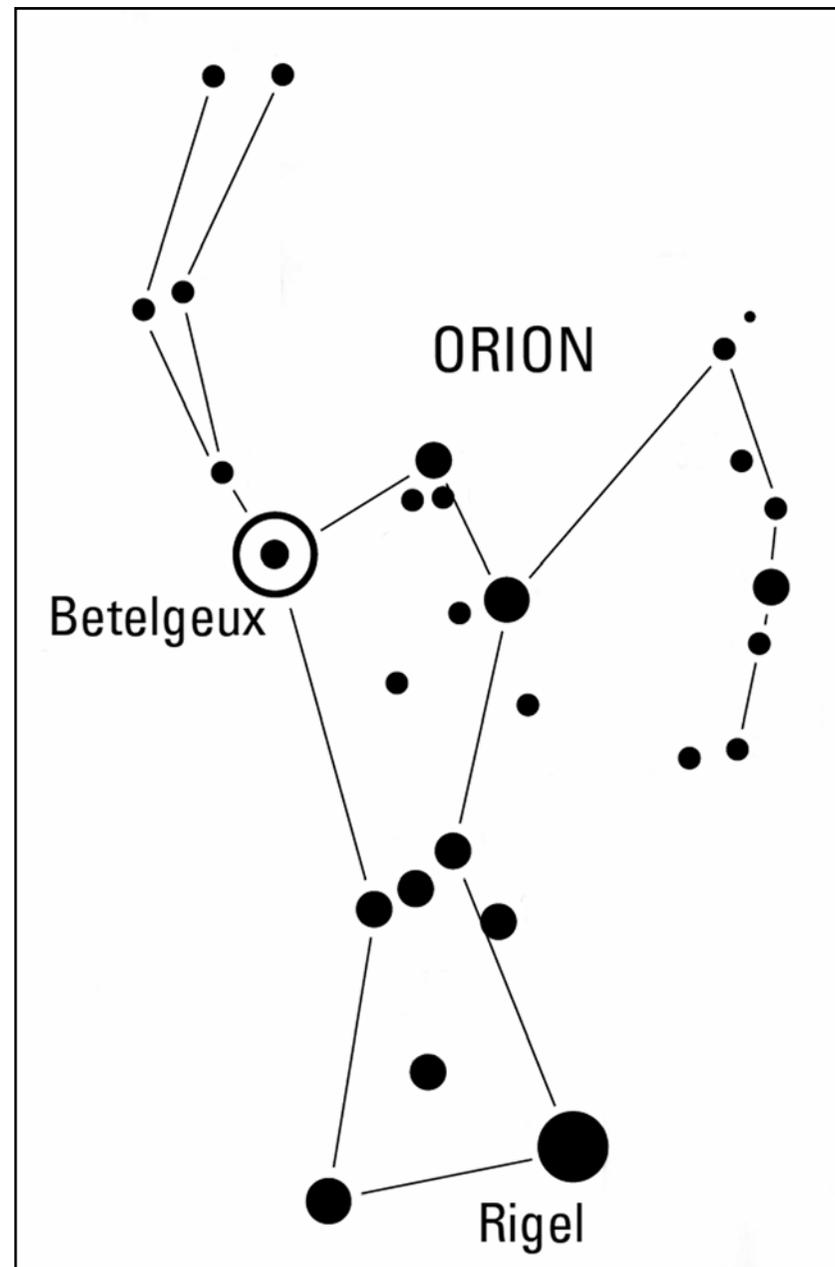


Fig.6: Constellation of Orion

(Sirius), the soul of Horus is called Orion, and the soul of Typhon (Seth) the Bear".¹⁶ Plutarch may be thought of by scholars as being unreliable in regards to the recording of Egyptian culture, however, considering the correct attribution of Isis and Seth to their respective constellations the conflation of Horus and Orion should in this case be taken seriously. More circumstantial is evidence to be found in the story recorded on the Metternich Stela, in which the young Horus is stung and killed by a scorpion – a well-known mythological motif suggesting the setting of Orion as the constellation Scorpius rises.¹⁷ It should be taken into account as well that Horus was said to have been placed upon the "seat of his father Osiris", perhaps an indication that they were both identified with Orion.

One of the arguments against this identification could well be that the constellations on this section of the 'astronomical ceilings' are all supposed to be north of the ecliptic.¹⁸ However, it is pertinent to note that this attribution by Egyptian astronomy experts Parker and Neugebauer is qualified by Parker with the words "*we are reasonably sure they are all north of the ecliptic*" [my emphasis], and Neugebauer names them as the northern constellations directly after mentioning that "artistic principles determined the arrangement of astronomical ceiling decorations".¹⁹ Also, in describing the northern constellations on the Denderah Zodiac, Parker mentions that these are "presumably all north of the ecliptic but none is depicted in the usual group of northern constellations".²⁰ Interestingly Plutarch mentions that the Egyptians hold the lion in honour because the Nile overflows when the sun comes into conjunction with Leo, which lies on the ecliptic.²¹ This suggests that the 'Lion' constellation on the astronomical ceilings may in fact be Leo (contrary to current thought). Lastly, to illustrate the difficulties in placing constellations such as Meskhetiu in the northern sky, consider the following passage from a tomb at Luxor, describing the movements of the ship of Re: "Once the constellation of Masheti (Meskhetiu) has been passed, they reach shelter in the centre of the sky on the side

south of Sah-Orion, and they turn towards the western horizon".²² From this account of the east-west passage of the sun, the ancient Egyptians' conception of the heavens appears to be more complex than usually thought. Another argument against the Horus-Orion link may be that the figure with the upraised arm is sometimes reversed; however, the same is true of the northern constellation of the hippopotamus on the Denderah circular zodiac, so this may well be dismissed as simply an issue of artistic representation. However, accepting a link between Horus and Orion has the strong point of explaining the attributes of the god, especially once Orion's role as a seasonal marker is understood.

THE RESURRECTION OF ORION

Using stars and constellations as seasonal markers was commonplace in the ancient world. The heliacal rising of Sirius in July was considered by the Romans to be the reason for the sultry weather.²³ To the Egyptians this same event signalled the beginning of the Nile flood and thus the New Year. The heliacal rising of a star or constellation was seen as its resurrection after being 'dead' for a period of time. This is due to the apparent motion of the stars and constellations throughout the year (a result of the motion of the Earth around the sun). When the sun 'moved' into the vicinity of a certain star or constellation (ie. the star/constellation was in the stellar background on the opposite side of the Sun from the Earth) it would only be seen late in the west just after the setting of the sun, and after a time would eventually 'disappear' (once the sun was in direct conjunction with it). Once the sun moved away from the vicinity of the star/constellation, it would then appear in the morning sky in the east just before dawn: this was its heliacal rising. Sirius and Orion both 'died' for approximately 70 days, which could well be the origin of the embalming time for Egyptian mummies.²⁴

In the time of the ancient Egyptians, Orion was ‘dead’ from around the spring equinox through to mid-summer. Interestingly, Frankfort notes that in Egypt the usual prevailing wind is from the north, which gives relief from the heat of the sun and makes life much more comfortable, but in late spring (the time of Orion’s ‘death’) the hot dry winds bringing “sandstorms and a brittle heat out of Africa to the south” became more prominent.²⁵ It was also from this period until Sirius’ heliacal rising that the Nile was at its lowest ebb. Plutarch explicitly states that Seth was considered the power of drought and the south wind, while Horus was the north wind, the “seasonal tempering of the surrounding air”.²⁶ He asserts that the story of their battles is actually an allegory for the seasonal change: as Horus ‘dies’ in spring, Seth gains the upper hand, until the reappearance of the rightful king. Thus Orion, connected with Horus, seems likely to have been used as a seasonal marker indicating the return of ‘orderly’ weather. As E.C. Krupp says, the “apparent connection between celestial and terrestrial phenomena greatly affected the Egyptian view of the world”.²⁷ This is just as evident when we turn our gaze to other parts of the Near East.

THE GOD AS AN ASTRONOMICAL ARCHETYPE

The ‘God with the Upraised Arm’ was present in many cultures and across a wide timeframe in the Near East. The gods Teshub, Adad, Baal (Fig. 7) and the unnamed Hittite weather god (Fig. 8) all had similar appearances and mythological contexts and could be considered incarnations of this one god.²⁸ A common motif in the depiction of all of these is the upraised arm wielding a mace or lightning. Also sometimes present is a vertical object in the left hand such as a spear or lightning, which has a parallel in the depictions of the Egyptian pharaohs in their smiting pose. The god is also often presented as riding on two mountain gods, or some sort of animal,

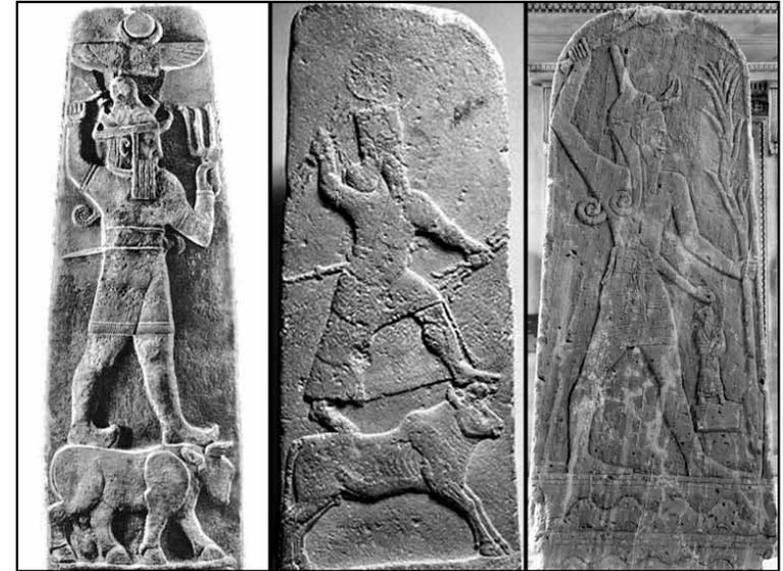


Fig.7: Depictions of (from left) Teshub, Adad and Baal



Fig.8: Hittite Weather God



Fig.9: Islamic Orion
(Source: Santillana & Von Dechend)

another parallel with Horus standing upon the hippopotamus (see Fig. 3) and with Narmer standing upon two ‘conquered enemies’(Fig. 1).

All of these characteristics are indicative of the constellation Orion, which is also often depicted with these same elements – see, for example, Fig. 9 which is an Islamic depiction of Orion taken from a celestial globe. The visual similarity is striking, but does the ‘meaning’ behind the image match up as well?

Treating the Ugaritic god Baal as representative of this group of gods may prove illuminating, as a number of common elements again suggest an association with the constellation Orion.

The myths concerning Baal have two major themes, which are very similar to the mythic themes surrounding Horus. The first is Baal’s battle with Yamm, which personifies the battle of order against chaos. The other is Baal’s death at the hand of Mot, and subsequent resurrection. This myth clearly suggests the yearly cycle, and also that Baal may well be a constellation. In a direct parallel to the Horus-Seth confrontation, Baal finds out that he is to be swallowed by Mot, the god of death and drought. His descent suggests that he is a sky-god: he is to be “numbered with those who descend into the earth” and sets his face “to go to the mountains where [the sun sets]”.²⁹ Also, after his death Athtar (who is identified with the planet Venus) tries to take Baal’s throne, but he cannot reach it.³⁰ In his absence “Shapash (the Sun) the luminary of the gods glowed hot, the heavens languished under the hand of Mot (drought)...the days passed into months”,³¹ a clear indication of the heat of summer. Baal’s return heralds the return of the rain, for he was believed to be manifest in

the storms of late autumn and winter.³² While acknowledging that cultivation was of the utmost importance to these early civilisations, it is difficult to subscribe to the common opinion that this is simply a “vegetation myth”.³³ This is likely a *part* of it, but the myth’s meaning surely encompasses more than this. For the result of the weather gods’ disappearance is not restricted to the suffering of vegetation; *every* aspect of life is affected.³⁴ This indicates an allegory for seasonal change. And the seasonal marker *par excellence* of the Mediterranean was Orion. His heliacal rising indicated summer, and the time of threshing; his evening appearance the approach of winter and its attendant storms.³⁵ Even taking into account the precession of the equinoxes, this attribute of Orion would have been reasonably constant for the time period concerning ancient civilisations in the Near East.

The similarity in depictions of this god across the Near East argues for its importance. As others have noted previously, in ancient civilizations “certain types of scene are repeated time and time again...the wealth of meaning which must have lain behind the monuments...was so alive to those who produced them that they did not require any explanatory notes”.³⁶ Also the common mythological motifs: Baal goes into the earth, the Hittite weather god is deemed to have withdrawn into a hole; Horus’s victory marks the return of the cooling north wind, Marduk’s vanquishing of Tiamat results in the “bringing of rain and coolness”.³⁷ The acceptance of this ‘God with the Upraised Arm’ as Orion, and as seasonal marker, fits the pictorial and contextual evidence well. Needless to say however, restricting any definition of these gods to one particular manifestation – such as astronomy – would be unwise. The significance of the ancient gods was manifold to their respective cultures, the many aspects of Osiris being good evidence of this. But the archetypal model upon which the ‘God with the Upraised Arm’ was based is quite probably the constellation Orion, in both depiction and ‘nature’. Describing these mythological concepts as being agricultural in nature only

covers part of the territory, as agriculture depends upon the celestial cycles. The importance of these cycles to ancient people cannot be underestimated. It is a proven fact that they recognised significant 'markers' within this cycle, and it is only natural that one of most important of these should be the constellation of Orion. To paraphrase (and thus update) Sir James Frazer's conclusions in his *The Golden Bough*,³⁸ in the course of our enquiry it has, I trust, been made clear that there is another natural phenomenon to which the conception of death and resurrection is as applicable as to the agricultural cycle. This phenomenon is the yearly death and resurrection of the constellation of Orion, as represented in the mythic themes concerning the various incarnations of the 'God with the Upraised Arm'.

Greg Taylor is the owner and editor of the online alternative news portal, *The Daily Grail* (www.dailygrail.com), and is also the editor of *Darklore*. He is widely read in topics that challenge the orthodox worldview, from alternative history to the mysteries of human consciousness. Greg currently resides in Brisbane, Australia. His first book, *The Guide to Dan Brown's The Lost Symbol*, is a guidebook to the esoteric history and locations featured in the best-selling sequel to *The Da Vinci Code*.