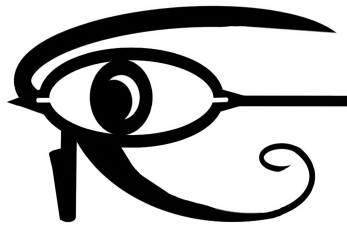


The Black Archive #12

PYRAMIDS OF MARS

Sampler



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Published in 2017 by Obverse Books

Cover Design © Cody Schell

Text © Kate Orman

Kate would like to thank:

Kyla Ward and Q

For their invaluable feedback

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What Do You Know of Sutekh?’

‘Sutekh’ is one of several variations of the name of the Ancient Egyptian deity Set, including the Greek version, Seth¹. (In this essay, I’ll call the god – as opposed to the **Doctor Who** character – ‘Set’, though some of the sources I quote will call him ‘Seth’.) Set is probably now best known from the story of Isis and Osiris written by Plutarch, a Greek scholar, in the first century CE². In his version of the tale, the would-be king Set tricks and drowns his brother Osiris, divides the body into pieces, and scatters them all over Egypt³. When the goddesses Isis and Nephthys reassemble Osiris’s body, he becomes the first mummy. Horus eventually defeats Set and becomes the pharaoh on earth, while Osiris reigns in the afterlife⁴; Set is tried for his crimes and punished, though not with death. Plutarch’s story is supplemented by a New Kingdom Egyptian papyrus, *The Contendings of Horus and Seth*, the comical story of Horus and Set’s fight before the court of the gods over who should become king.

However, these are later versions of the tale: Horus and Set were two of Egypt’s oldest deities, and the story of their conflict was one of its oldest myths⁵ – congruent with the basis of *Pyramids of Mars*, in which the Osirans’ contact with Ancient Egypt dates to the time of the country’s founding. The story is recorded in the Pyramid Texts engraved in the tombs of pharaohs of the Old Kingdom – although not as a neat narrative like Plutarch’s account, but in references and allusions. Priests and kings would have understood those mentions, in something like the way I can talk about **Doctor Who** in this essay without having to explain the basics of the show to the reader.

In their fight, Set destroys one of Horus’s eyes, and Horus destroys Set’s testicles. The eyes of Horus, the falcon god of the sky, were thought of as the moon (the left eye, harmed by Set) and the sun⁶. (Sarah calls Horus ‘god of light’⁷. Perhaps she is only being metaphorical; or perhaps she has this connection in mind.) As well as crediting the pharaoh with restoring Horus’s eye, the Pyramid Texts also describe the gods’ expedition, led by the moon-god Thoth, to retrieve the eye from Set – who is said to have trampled on it and eaten it. (If these details seem contradictory, it’s because they are. I’ll return to the internal inconsistencies of Egyptian mythology later.)

The Eye of Horus appears throughout Egyptian art and mythology (Set’s testicles are mentioned rather less often) and plays an important role in *Pyramids*. It was one of the most popular amulets, and a symbol used to protect both the living and the dead: depicted as a human eye with the markings that surround the eye of a falcon⁸, it was painted on coffins, in tombs, and on the prows of boats, and placed over the incision made on mummies to remove the internal organs for embalming⁹.

¹ Te Velde, Herman, *Seth: God of Confusion*, p1.

² Plutarch, *Moralia*, trans Frank C Babbitt.

³ Set’s attempt to ensure Osiris’ permanent demise is not dissimilar to the Time Lord’s destruction of the body of Morbius as described in *The Brain of Morbius* episode 2 (1976): ‘His body was placed in a dispersal chamber and atomised to the nine corners of the universe.’ I wonder if Robert Holmes recalled this detail from Egyptian mythology when he was reworking Terrance Dicks’ script.

⁴ Pinch, Geraldine, *Egyptian Mythology*, p78.

⁵ Griffiths, J Gwyn, *The Conflict of Horus and Seth from Egyptian and Classical Sources*, pp1-4.

⁶ Mercer, Samuel AB, *Horus: Royal God of Egypt*, pp150-51.

⁷ Episode 1.

⁸ Ulmer, Rivka B Kern, ‘The Divine Eye in Ancient Egypt and in the Midrashic Interpretation of Formative Judaism’. *Journal of Religion and Society* #5, 2003, p274.

⁹ Wilkinson, Richard H, *Reading Egyptian Art: A Hieroglyphic Guide to Ancient Egyptian Painting and Sculpture*, p43.

The Eye of Horus functions in *Pyramids* much as it did in Ancient Egypt: as the embodiment of Horus's protecting power¹⁰.

In *Pyramids* Sutekh's eyes, too, have power – in fact, his mask is marked with two Eyes of Horus, as if again to warn or to contain his deadly mental force. Glowing eyes are one of the few elements to survive from Lewis Greifer's original outline, along with the return of an evil alien-god and a rocket launch which must be stopped¹¹.

The Egyptians loved plays on words, and this is one: 'eye' in Ancient Egyptian is 'irt', and the verb 'iri', 'to do, to act, to create' can be written with just the eye hieroglyph¹². A god's eye is the personification of their power¹³. Rivka B Kern Ulmer writes: 'the eye is the chief organ by which visual power is transmitted, notwithstanding if the eye belongs to a god, a human being, or a natural phenomenon, such as the sun.'¹⁴ In *Pyramids*, the Eye of Horus is a literal transmitter of Horus's power (or perhaps the combined might of his hundreds of allies). We don't know what kind of power it uses to keep Sutekh paralysed in his tomb: it might be a radio signal like the warning sent to Earth, or a psychic force, or some other, unknown energy. The only thing we can be sure of is that, like all matter and energy in the universe, it can't travel faster than the speed of light – so this, at least, is not 'contrary to the laws of the universe'¹⁵. In fact, by holding back Sutekh's destructiveness, it is maintaining the order of the cosmos.

¹⁰ The script, bathetically, describes the Eye of Horus on Mars as 'a red crystal rugby football' pulsating 'like a pedestrian crossing beacon'. (Wiggins, Martin, 'Infotext', *Pyramids of Mars* DVD.) There is just enough resemblance between the round red oval of the televised Eye on its white lotus, and a painted carving of King Tut's egg-shaped, copper-red head emerging from a white-and-pale-blue lotus, to make me wonder if the designers might have been influenced by pictures of it.

¹¹ Pixley, 'Archive', p33.

¹² Faulkner, Raymond O, *A Concise Dictionary of Middle Egyptian*, pp25-27.

¹³ Pinch, *Egyptian Mythology*, p128.

¹⁴ Ulmer, 'The Divine Eye', p4.

¹⁵ Episode 1. In Episode 4, Sutekh communicates with Marcus Scarman on Mars in real time. Perhaps, in certain circumstances, his 'cytronic control' is capable of 'spooky action at a distance' — Einstein's description of quantum entanglement, in which particles seem to communicate instantly, no matter how far apart they are. We can only guess at the powers of a cytronic particle accelerator. Or perhaps Sutekh is, in fact, violating the laws of space and time?

'Superstitious Savage!'

The 1960s and 1970s in Britain were a time of anxiety around the continuing loss of the Empire and about the arrival of non-white immigrants from former British colonies, reflected in the nervous humour of series such as **Curry and Chips** (1969), **Mind Your Language** (ITV, 1977-1979) and **Love Thy Neighbour** (ITV, 1972-1976). Some **Doctor Who** stories overtly reference this period: *The Mutants* (1972) concerns the end of the Earth Empire's 500-year occupation of, and exploitation of, the planet Solos. (By contrast, *Colony in Space* (1971) and *Death to the Daleks* (1974) take the human exploitation of planets populated by 'primitives' as a given.)

Other stories draw on earlier paranoia about imperial subjects and immigrants. The vicious caricature of the Chinese as secretive, criminal, and weird was most prominently promulgated by the **Fu Manchu** novels by Sax Rohmer (author of *The Green Eyes of Bast*) and their TV and film adaptations, including the 60s flicks starring Christopher Lee which are partly the source of *The Talons of Weng-Chiang*¹⁶. Perhaps fortunately, modern Egypt and Egyptians are largely irrelevant to *Pyramids of Mars*¹⁷. The only Egyptians in the story are Scarman's workers, including Ahmed, whose one line is delivered by Palestinian-born actor Vic Tablian¹⁸; and Ibrahim Namin, played by Irish actor Peter Mayock¹⁹, dead by the end of episode 1.

Doctor Who fans are understandably reluctant to acknowledge racism in the series, especially in well-loved and highly-regarded stories like *Talons*²⁰. While *Talons* wears its contempt for the Chinese on its sleeve – to the extent that it was not screened in Ontario after consultation with the Chinese immigrant community there²¹ – *Pyramids* is lucky in that the racism in its DNA has become somewhat diluted. This is not to say that it's absent: *Pyramids* still has its fanatical foreigner and the hidden, exotic danger he brings into Britain – a stereotype of Arab immigrants all too familiar today.

But while the sixties Fu Manchu movies replicate Sax Rohmer's crude fantasies, Hammer's *The Mummy* gives Ibrahim Namin's forerunner Mehemet Bey a thought-provoking encounter with archaeologist John Banning (Peter Cushing), in which the dignified Egyptian argues that Banning's profession involves 'desecration': 'You force your way in, you remove the remains of the long-dead kings, and send them to places like the British Museum, where thousands of people can stare at

¹⁶ Rohmer admitted 'I know nothing about the Chinese' (quoted by Douglas G Greene in his introduction to *The Insidious Dr. Fu-Manchu*, New York, Dover, 1997, p vi). Rohmer apparently used whatever 'Eastern' details came to mind, including repeatedly describing Fu as resembling Pharaoh Seti I and giving him an Egyptian slave woman named Kâramanèh. In the movie *The Brides of Fu Manchu* (1966), Fu's appropriately exotic secret hideout is an Ancient Egyptian temple.

¹⁷ Perhaps it's fortunate, also, that there are no black characters (a *rara avis* in 70s **Doctor Who** in any case). While people from neighbouring Nubia were part of Ancient Egyptian society at every level – servants, tutors, police, soldiers, priests, and pharaohs – movies set in Ancient Egypt tend to portray them solely as slaves. This relationship was apparently seen as so natural that Karloff's Imhotep is able to command a black man in modern Cairo.

¹⁸ Credited in *Pyramids* as Vik Tablian. 'Vic Tablian', Internet Movie Database.

¹⁹ 'Irish actor Peter Mayock as The Young Lieutenant in a scene...', RTE Archive; a review of the play 'Love and a Bottle' remarks 'in Peter Mayock Ireland has a true comedian' ('At the Dublin Theatre Festival', *Punch*, 19 October 1966, issue 6580, p597.)

²⁰ Vasquez, Joshua, 'The Moral Economy of **Doctor Who**: Forgiving Fans and the Objects of their Devotion'. Hansen, Christopher J, *Ruminations, Peregrinations, and Regenerations*, pp239-40. In a possibly unintentional pun, Vasquez refers to the 'canonisation' of Robert Holmes by fans.

²¹ 'Overseas Overview', DWM #71, p28.

them.’ For his part, Banning deliberately provokes Bey in the hope the Egyptian will give himself away – calling Karnak a ‘third-rate god’ whose followers’ ‘standard of intelligence must have been remarkably low’ – much as the Doctor often needles his foes into boasting about their plans or revealing themselves (Klieg and Davros both demonstrate their megalomania at the Doctor’s prompting). There are no such tricks to be played on Sutekh.

In the *Mummy* films the original tomb violators, Imhotep and Kharis, are cursed for disturbing the peace of the dead. Opening an Egyptian tomb and removing its treasures to the UK or the US triggers a similar curse, but the ‘high priest’ and the mummy are the story’s villains, and the hero and heroine will escape in the end. The movies might contrast an entrepreneur’s crass commercialism with an archaeologist’s loftier motives (as in *The Curse of the Mummy’s Tomb*), but almost nowhere is archaeology itself questioned²² – any more than Britain’s occupation is. Banning taunts Bey: ‘The history of your country is steeped in violence.’ Somehow, the aggression of France and Britain have become Egyptian aggression, represented by the ‘high priest’ and the mummy. The streamlined retelling that is *Pyramids* has no room for such considerations: Namin is dispatched without ever having a scene with the Doctor.

Pyramids avoids all these issues by making Sutekh the Destroyer an absolute existential threat, not just to ‘unbelievers’, but to everything alive. He is not a villain with a point of view to be considered, nor flaws which can be exploited by the Doctor’s clever tongue. He is a nuclear device, a black hole; there is no moral argument to be had; he must be stopped. As in Egyptian Gothic literature and the movies, British men find themselves largely helpless in the face of an ancient, mystic Eastern power. Even the Doctor defeats Sutekh by sheer luck – or rather, by being as well-equipped for his task as Perseus. Without his respiratory bypass system and his TARDIS, all would have been lost.

²² As well as Bey’s speech, the fortune-teller Haiti in *The Mummy’s Shroud* takes pity on the leading lady and tells her how to avoid the curse: apologise to the mummy for desecrating the tomb.