

## **Role of Wepset in the Ancient Egyptian Religion**

**Ahmed Samy Abd Al-sameea (\*)**

### **Abstract**

This research aims to throw light on the goddess Wepset and her role in the ancient Egyptian religion. This is by tracing her name, iconography, origin and her presence in the Egyptian mythology. The researcher followed the presence of this goddess in the different ancient mythologies, namely, the Eye of Re and the Distant One. Then the researches passes by the role of Wepset in the books of the afterlife, particularly, the *Imy-Dwat*, the Book of Caverns, and the Book of Earth and in the different manuscripts concerned with the idea of punishing the evil ones, especially Apophis. The name of the goddess comes from the verb wps which means to burn. This is convenient to her role as a burning and fire-spitting goddess. The main task for the Distant Goddess is to defend her father, Re, against all enemies. This defense is reflected in the destruction by fire / flame the enemies in general (sbyw, xftyw, XAkW-ibw), or more particularly Apophis. In the New Kingdom guides to the afterlife, Wepset prepares the way for the resurrection of Re-Osiris by destroying his enemies. Wepset and her partner Nesret appear on the books of the afterlife and burning all enemies of Re and Osiris.

---

\* Assistant-Lecturer, Tourism-Guidance Department, Faculty of Arts, Ain-Shams University.

## دور Wepset في الديانة المصرية القديمة

احمد سامي عبد السميع

### ملخص

يهدف هذا البحث إلى إلقاء الضوء على الإلهة وبست ودورها في الديانة المصرية القديمة عن طريق تتبع أصل أسمها وصورتها و دورها في الأساطير المصرية القديمة.

لقد قام الباحث بتتبع وجود الإلهة محل الدراسة في الأساطير المصرية القديمة وخصوصا أسطورة عين رع وأسطورة الإلهة البعيدة. وينتقل الباحث بعد ذلك إلي دورها في كتب العالم الآخر وكونها إلهة عقاب.

وخلص الباحث أن أصل أسم الإلهة هو من فعل "وبس" الذي يعنى "يحرق" والذي يعتبر ملائما تماما لطبيعتها ودورها في الحضارة المصرية القديمة.

وينتهي البحث بعرض بعض من أدوارها في الديانة المصرية القديمة وخصوصا دورها في الدفاع عن رع، أوزوريس، حورس والملك ضد أعدائهم.

### Name and origin

The goddess Wepset is one of the goddesses who played a great role in the ancient Egyptian mythology. Before discussing the role of the goddess in the ancient Egyptian religion, it is necessary to throw light on the origin of the goddess and her iconography.

The name of Wepset most probably derives from the verb "wps" . This name had been attested since the New Kingdom which means "to burn" with the determinative of the fire and adding the feminine "t" to mean "she who burns or the firing one"<sup>2</sup>. This meaning is convenient to her nature as a fire-spitting cobra goddess.

An alternative explanation proposed by Sethe, who analyzed *wps(t)* as *wpt* "brow" + the nominal affix  $-s^3$  is unlikely, not only because Sethe wrongly denied the existence of a verb *wps*, but also since the early attestations of the goddess already write her name with the fire-determinative<sup>4</sup>. Sethe cited that in Junker's material in *Der Auszug der Hathor- Tefnut aus Nubien*, the eye of Re appears as fire-spitting cobra under the name *Nsrt*. Junker states that the eye of Re was mentioned in Philae where her appeasement (*shtp*) is done by Thoth; also in Dendera in identification with the local shape of the eye of Re, Hathor<sup>5</sup>.

Sethe claims that the root of the name, despite containing the determinative of fire, is derived from the verb *wps* "Enlighten"<sup>6</sup>. This is the same when choosing a word for burning or fire and named it *Nsrt* (we have to note that all goddesses connected with the myth of the Eye of Re have somehow relation with fire and so lighting). According to Sethe and concerning the verb, it is rather derived from  *Wpt* "Top of head, Apex"<sup>7</sup> with the nominal suffix "s" and the feminine ending  "t". This idea may give the possibility of the meaning of *Wpst* as the uraeus which protects the  *Wpt* "The Apex or top of the head" of Re.

Despite all of this, the oldest attestation of the goddess so far can be traced in the Coffin Texts where she is associated with the legend of the eye of Re. Shu is said to have calmed the Ba of Wepset who was in the midst of her rage "*skbb.n.i b3 Wpst sgr.n.i hrt-ib*

*dšrw.s*<sup>8</sup>.

### **Iconography of the Goddess**

Wepset is depicted in various iconographic representations reflecting her role in each scene. The earliest iconography so far for the goddess is the uraeus as she and Nesret are depicted together in the first hour of the *Imy-dw3t* on the walls of the tomb of Thutmosis III<sup>9</sup>. The same iconography can be traced on the walls of the tomb of Ramses VI<sup>10</sup>.

Her most frequent depiction is anthropomorphic goddess wearing the upright cobra above her head. She is also equipped with the *ḥ* and *w3s* signs. This depiction can be seen throughout the Egyptian temples during the Graeco-Roman era and the temples of Lower Nubia<sup>11</sup>. In the latter depiction, the uraeus is occasionally supplied with Hathor symbol such as the sundisc between cow's horns or Tefnut symbol such as the lion's head<sup>12</sup>. She is also depicted as a female Hippo with a cow's head and horns and holding two knives in hands<sup>13</sup>.

### **Her Role in the Ancient Egyptian Religion**

Wepset has an important role to play in the ancient Egyptian religion and mythology. According to the ancient Egyptian mythology, the "Eye of Re" and the "Distant one" are complementary. After the primordial creator Atum had produced Shu and Tefnut, they became lost in the darkness of the *Nun*. Atum sent his eye to search for these lost children. Then Atum united with Re to become the creator sun god. The eye returned with Shu and Tefnut, but wept with rage when she saw that Re-Atum had grown a new solar eye: the Glorious One. The Eye of Re became uncontrollable and angry and refused to stay with her father Re. she went to a distant realm, sometimes identified with the Nubian and Libyan deserts. There, she rages in her terrible leonine form, destroying everything she meets. Re is left vulnerable to his enemies and he missed his daughter and needs the eye to defend himself against the force of chaos and rebels among humanity. He sent out one or more of the gods to persuade the Distant Goddess to return<sup>14</sup>.

The main task for the Distant Goddess is to defend her father, Re, against all enemies. This defense is reflected in the

## Role of Wepset in the Ancient Egyptian Religion

destruction by fire / flame the enemies in general (*sbyw*, *hftyw*, *h3kw-ibw*), or more particularly Apophis. Accordingly, the relationship between Re and Wepset, either as a goddess by her own or personification of other goddesses, comes from the guarantee of the defense of Re by Wepset through her theological aspect, *nbit*, with which she operates. The same action of defense against the enemies of Horus<sup>15</sup>, Osiris<sup>16</sup> and general defense.

In the New Kingdom guides to the afterlife, Wepset prepares the way for the resurrection of Re-Osiris by destroying his enemies. Thus in the *Imy-dwat* she is one of a group of 12 apotropaic uraei who illumine the darkness of the Netherworld<sup>17</sup>. Wepset and Nesret are the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> of the 12 cobras at the lower register of the first hour of the *Imy-dwat* who illuminate the underworld. The deceased mention the names of goddesses, which illuminate the darkness in the

Duat and also talks forward, "Enlighten the darkness". Like the often (called *3ht*) uraeus of the King enlightened the world for him, so are the snakes in the underworld with their fire (the poison they spew) not only expel and destroy the enemy creatures, but illuminate the roadway of the solar bark in the deep darkness of the underworld.

In the same concern, Wepset and Nesret are shown in the Book of Caverns where they kindle fire under the cauldrons which contain the decapitated enemies of Osiris



"*Tꜣrty iptn Nsrt Wpst ꜥ3w ḥprw nbwt šḥrw m ḥtmyt wdw nsrw.tn  
3sbt.tn ḥrw ḥswt n thftiwWsir im.s*"

"O, the two cobras (*Tꜣrty*), Nesret and Wepset, great of forms, ladies of plans in the place of destruction, throw your flame. Your fire under the cauldrons in which are the enemies of Osiris"<sup>18</sup>.

They are both mentioned in the same Book of Caverns



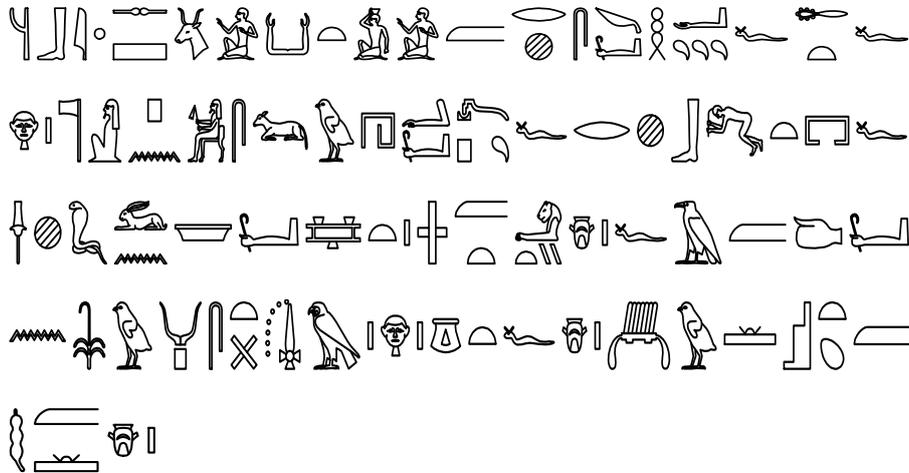
"*ḥtm ḥftiw ḥnty dw3t Wpst di.s nsrt im.sn ḥtm ḥftiw nsw nb ḥtm ḥftiw  
ḥnty dw3t Nsrt di.s ḥh.s im.sn ḥtm ḥftiw nsw nb ḥtm ḥftiw ḥnty dw3t  
sdwt.sn wb3.n.s dw3t ḥtm ḥftiw nsw nb*"

"The enemies at the head of the Duat are annihilated, Wepset launches flame among them, and the enemies of king are annihilated. The enemies at the head of the Duat are annihilated; Nesret puts her heat among them. The enemies of king are annihilated. The enemies at the head of the Duat are annihilated, their flames (burning them) reveal (illuminate) the Duat, and the enemies of the king are annihilated"<sup>19</sup>.

Role of Wepset in the Ancient Egyptian Religion

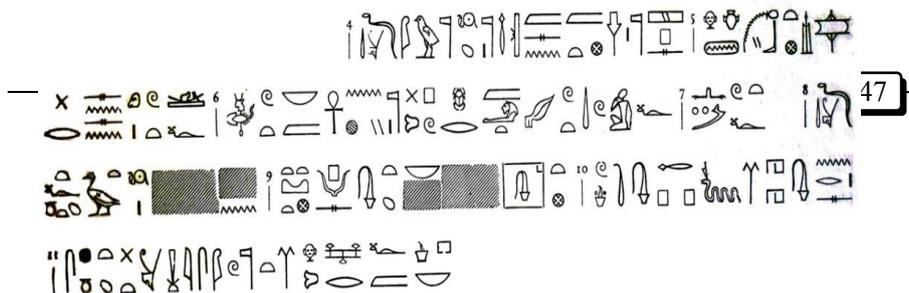
In the Book of Earth, the main scene depicts the earth god Aker as a double sphinx, with the solar bark atop his mound; the bark is depicted, its direction reversed, between personifications of the entrance and exit of the realm of the dead. Below is a group of four figures, represents a kneeling figure turned right between two cobras. The one at the right bears the name of Nesret, the kneeling personage is *Isy*, while the cobra at the left is Wepset. Here, they guard the place of execution when Re passes<sup>20</sup>.

As a goddess who annihilates the enemies of Osiris and Re, Wepset appears in a hymn to Osiris in the Memphite tomb of Haremheb. She is addressed



"šbi šs3 (m) k3t.i m rḥs ḥw.f ḥt.f ḥr ntr šps pn iwh stp.f r ḥbt.f.....  
 3m n sw Wpst "The rebel, I am skilled (in) my task of cutting up his body in front of this august god. His body (cut off parts) is loaded upon his slaughtering place (place of execution), ...Wepset has seized him"<sup>21</sup>.

Many occurrences clarify the role of Wepset in the punishment of Apophis, the eternal enemy of the sun-god, Re, who tries to prevent the sun-rise every day and thus creating chaos. In the temple of Philae, Wepset burns Apophis



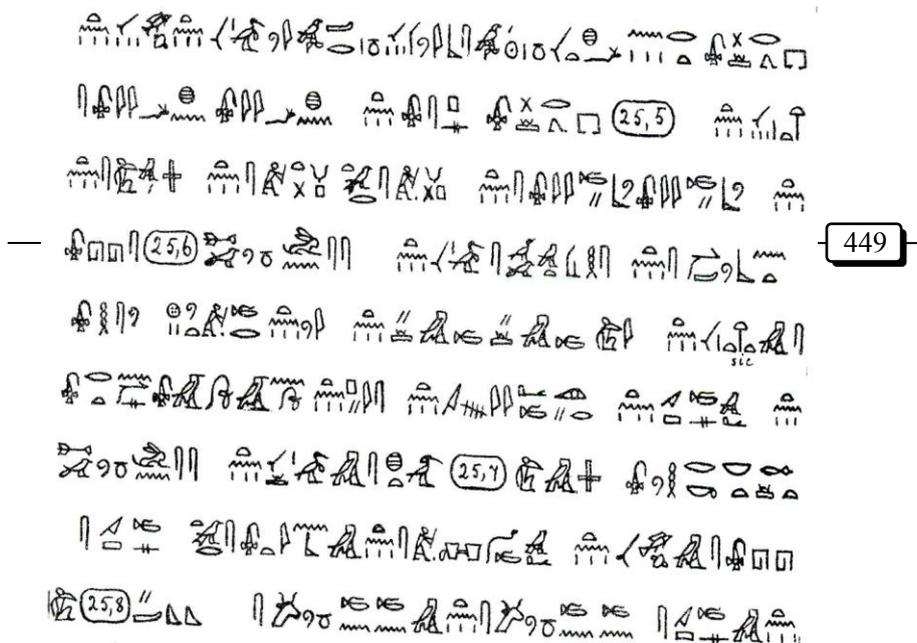
(4) *dd mdw in Šw s3 R<sup>c</sup> ntr 3 m Snmt šhm šps* (5) *hry-ib i3t-w<sup>c</sup>bt iwn wr sns<sup>n</sup>.tw im.f* (6) *srk htyt nb m ʿnhy ntr wr pw hpr sdm.tw mdw.f* (7) *n m33.tw.f* (8) *dd mdw in Tfnt s3t R<sup>c</sup> \\\\\\\* (9) *Wpst nbt nbit m hwt-nbit* (10) *wbd ʿ3pp m hh n r3.s* (11) *šhnt wrt n sn.s Šw tm hr hr.f m bw nb*

(4) Words spoken by Shu, son of Re, the great god in Bigga, the august image (5) who resides in Abaton, the great blast (wind) by which we breathe (6) and causes all throats to breath by the living, he is the great god who came to the existence before, we hear his words (7) (but) we do not see him (8) words spoken by Tefnut, the daughter of Re\\\\\\\\ (9) Wepset, lady of the flame in the chapel of the flame (10) she burns Apophis with the flame of her mouth (11) the great wife of her brother Shu who will not be away of him to any place else<sup>22</sup>.

More particular and in the papyrus of *Bremner-Rhind*, she is mentioned many times as a punisher of Apophis.

(24,8) *hr hr hr.k 3pp hft n R<sup>c</sup> pr sdt r.k pr m irt Hr pr nbit wrt* (24,9)  
*r.k pr m irt Hr mdd mtn hh n nsrt pr ht r.k mr nsrt.s r B3.k 3h.k*  
 (24,10) *hk3w.k h3t.k šwt.k nbt 3m šhm.s im.k sswn hh.s m B3.k dm.s r*  
*irw.k sswn.s* (24,11) *hprw.k iw.k hr.tw irt Hr dndn.ti r hft.s ntb.ti*  
*Wpst wrt šhm irt R<sup>c</sup>* (24,12) *im.k wnm.ti Wnmyt iwty spy (nn spy) r*  
*hr m(y) šhm r.k*

(24,8) fall upon your face, O, Apophis, you, foe of Re; the fire which issues from the Eye of Horus comes forth against you, the great (24,9) flame which issues from the Eye of Horus comes forth against you, it presses on you with a blast of Nesret, the fire comes forth against you, and fierce is its flame against your Ba, your spirit (24,10) your magic, your body and your shade; the Mistress of Burning has power over you, her fiery blast makes chastisement in your soul, she annihilates your shape, she chastises (24,11) your form, and you are fallen to the Eye of Horus which is enraged against its foe. Wepset the great parches you, the Eye of Re has power (24, 12) over you, the devouring flame consumes you, and there is no remnant to retreat (fall)<sup>23</sup>.



(25, 4) *pr sdt r.tn hft n R<sup>c</sup> sbyw n Hr r B3(w)w.tn h3wt.tn šwwt.tn* (25, 5) *pr sdt ps.s tn hnfy hnfy.s tn wbdw wbd.s tn Wps(t) wrt wp.s tn wnm.s tn ntb.s tn shtm.s B3.tn sswn.s* (25, 6) *hh.s m šwt.tn i dm dm.tn dr.tw sp-sn wsh.tn mds.tn iry ʿd sip.tn n w3w3t Nsrt ʿ3t nbt rkḫ wnm* (25, 7) *3ht.s m B3.tn sswn hh.s m h3t.tn mdd.s tn m nbit wrt ds.s tn m ds.s dndn.s tn m dndn.s* (25, 8) *wnm.s.(tn) m nbit.s nsr.s tn m nsrt.s h3.s (hwd.s) tn m h3t.s (hwd.s) rkḫ.s tn m rkḫ.s 3m.s tn m 3m.s spt.s tn m rn.s pfy* (25, 9) *n sdt wp.s tn n rn.s pwy n Wpst wrt hr.tn n nbit.s spd nsrt wrt imy hh.s wnm.s 3ht.s m b3w.tn*

(25, 4) The fire comes forth against you, you foe of Re, rebels of (against) Horus, and against your soul(s), your bodies and your shades (25, 5) the fire comes forth, it cooks you, its glow bakes you, its burning burns you, Wepset the great divides you, she devours you, she parches you, she destroys your souls (25, 6) her fiery blast makes chastisement in your shades. O, you who ought to be annihilated, be annihilated; you are crushed, crushed! You shall be burned, you shall be cut down, you shall be slaughtered, you shall be condemned to Neseret the great, the mistress of heat, and its glow shall consume (25, 7) your souls, its blast shall make chastisement in your bodies, it shall press on you with its great flame, it shall cut

## Role of Wepset in the Ancient Egyptian Religion

---

you with its knife, it shall rage against you with its wrath, (25, 8) consume (you) with its flame, shrivel (burn up) you with its fire, blast you with its blaze, scorch you (25, 9) with its heat, burn you with its burning; it shall break you, in this, its name of fire, it shall divide you, in this, its name of Wepset the great; you shall fall to its flame, for sharp is the Nesret the great which is in its blast, and its glow shall devour your souls<sup>24</sup>.

### **Wepset and the Mammisi**

Wepset plays a role in the birth of the child-god. It clearly seen note the clear presence of Wepset in the *Mammisi* (the main seat of Isis and her son Horus) if compared to the number of scenes in which she operates.

In the *Mammisi*, Wepset is the mother of the child-king, Horus, and she is responsible for his defense. In the same concern, Wepset is considered as the mother of the child god, Horus<sup>25</sup>.

### **List of References**

- <sup>1</sup> R. Grieshammer, "Feuer", in. *LÄ* II, cols. 205-206
- <sup>2</sup> *Wb* I, 305, 8; J. Van Dijk, "Wepset" in: *LÄ* VI, cols. 1218-1220; Wilson, *PL*, p. 227, D. Meeks, *Ann Lex* I, p. 87, 0908.
- <sup>3</sup> Kurt Sethe, *Zuraltägyptischen Sage vomSonnenauge das in der Fremde war*, *UGAA* 5.3, 1912, 13-14; J. Osing, *Die Nominalbildung des Ägyptischen*, 2 Bde, *SDAIK* 3, Mainz 1976, 872 n. 1415.
- <sup>4</sup> *CTI*, 378-379b, 382-383a.
- <sup>5</sup> H. Junker, *Der Auszug der Hathor- Tefnut aus Nubien*, *APAW* 1911, Berlin 1911, pp. 31-35.
- <sup>6</sup> *Wb* I, 305, 11-17
- <sup>7</sup> *Wb*, 297, 10- 298, 5
- <sup>8</sup> *CTI*, 378-379b, 382-383a.
- <sup>9</sup> E. g., Bucher, *Tombes des Thoutmosis III et d'Amenophis II*, Le Caire 1932, pls.

2. 14.

<sup>10</sup> A. Piankoff, *The Tomb of Ramses VI*, New York 1954, pl. 117

<sup>11</sup> J. Van Dijk, "Wepset" in: *LÄ VI*, col. 1218.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, col. 1218; H. Junker and E. Winter, *Das Geburtshaus des Tempels der Isis in Philä*, DÖAW Sonderband, Wien 1965, p. 216.

<sup>13</sup> E. Chassinat, *Le Mammisi d'Edfu*, MIFAO 16, Le Caire 1939, pl. 43, 2.

<sup>14</sup> G. Pinch, *Egyptian Mythology, A Guide to the Gods, Goddesses and Traditions of Ancient Egypt*, Oxford 2002, pp. 71-73 and 128-131

<sup>15</sup> H. Junker and E. Winter, *op.cit.*, p. 321, 1-4, 8-10, 14-17

<sup>16</sup> G. Bénédite, *Le temple de Philae*, MMAF 13, Paris 1893, p. 86, 16.

<sup>17</sup> E. Hornung, Text zum Amduat, *AH* 13-15, Genève 1987-1994, p. 143, Nr. 92-93; E. Hornung, *Das Amduat, Die Schrift des verborgenen Raumes*, *ÄA* 7, Wiesbaden 1963, p. 29; J. v. Dijk, "Wepset", in: *LÄ VI*, col. 1218.

<sup>18</sup> A. Piankoff, "Le livre des Quererts", in., *BIFAO* 43, 1945, pls. 97-98.

<sup>19</sup> Piankoff, *Ibid.*, pl. 100.

<sup>20</sup> A. Piankoff, *La Création du disque solaire*, *BdE* 19, 1953, p. 26; E. Hornung, E. Hornung, *Ägyptische Unterweltsbücher*, Zürich-München 1972, pp. 445-446.

<sup>21</sup> J. v. Dijk, in; Geoffrey T. Martin, *The Memphite Tomb of Horemheb commander-in-chief of Tutankhamun*, London, 1989, p. 63, pl. 67.

<sup>22</sup> Bénédite, *op.cit.*, p. 105, 4-11.

<sup>23</sup> R.O. Faulkner, *The Papyrus Bremner-Rhind* (BM No. 10188), *BAe* 3, Bruxelles 1933, 24, 8-12; R.O. Faulkner, "The Bremner-Rhind Papyrus": III: D. "The Book of Overthrowing 'Apep", in., *JEA* 23, 2, 1937, p. 169.

<sup>24</sup> *pBremner-Rhind*, 25, 4-9; Faulkner, *The Bremner-Rhind Papyrus: III: D. The Book of Overthrowing 'Apep*, in., *JEA* 23, 2, p. 170

<sup>25</sup> J. de Morgan, *Kom Ombos. Catalogue des monuments et inscriptions de l'Égypte antique*, III, Vienne 1909, 578, 1= A. Gutbub, *Textes fondamentaux de la théologie de Kom Ombo*, *BdE* 47/1, Le Caire 1973, p. 230.