

## **Why is water an effective ingredient in rituals, when it is considered a source of danger in Ancient Egypt?**

Rituals played a significant role in both the religion and daily life of Ancient Egypt. Of the many ingredients which could be used in rituals, one of the most intriguing is water. Although to a modern audience it seems trivial and almost mundane, it is one of the more elusive ingredients in the ancient world. In particular, what is striking is how it is used as a source for purification and rejuvenation, despite the inherent dangers water, especially the Nile, brings to Egypt.

Water for the Ancient Egyptians appears to have largely been regarded as a symbol of rejuvenation and renewal. It was one of the more commonly used liquids in temple rituals.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, it was vital for the purification of the temple and consequently appears to have been a prominent ingredient in rituals. It can therefore be suggested that they were an effective way of activating *HkA*<sup>2</sup> in such instances. Such rituals were well attested in Egypt<sup>3</sup> where water was either poured onto the ground or an object, or it was offered as a drink or libation.<sup>4</sup> In particular, deities were ‘urged’ to drink water offered in rituals as it symbolised rejuvenation and life.<sup>5</sup> In the second night hour of *Stundenwachen* Horus explicitly states that he is purified with water, amongst other things,<sup>6</sup> demonstrating that it is even acknowledged on a divine level that water had a purifying quality which could not be ignored.

A papyrus found in a Roman Period temple reveals that at least 6 rituals involving libations were included as a part of the daily temple ritual.<sup>7</sup> The temple needed to be cleaned

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<sup>1</sup> Poo (2010), pp. 1-2.

<sup>2</sup> Pinch (2006), pp. 9-11.

<sup>3</sup> Dils (1993), p. 109.

<sup>4</sup> Poo (2010), p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Dils (1993), p. 110.

<sup>7</sup> Poo (2010), p. 5.

and purified before any ritual could take place,<sup>8</sup> and so the water used was symbolically pure. The sacred lakes in temples were representations of the watery Nun and so their use within the sphere of temple rituals represents the regenerative nature of this primordial element. This property of the Nun is a seemingly unique Egyptian perception: that water existed as a ‘primordial element’ was a general feature of creation in many cultures, although it appears its abilities and uses in regeneration were entirely native.<sup>9</sup> The Nun itself was attested solely in the mythical sphere until the New Kingdom, when it became synonymous with the Nile and was incorporated into its terminology.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, this new representation of the Nun was assimilated with the Nile god Hapy, a manifestation of the inundation. A stela of Thutmose III in Karnak details that a ‘podium of hard stone’ had been in place since the temple was flooded, ‘because of the Nun, when he was coming at his season’.<sup>11</sup> This brief reference indicates that now the annual flood, which revitalised the land and enabled crops to grow, was now associated with the primeval waters and consequently with renewal and rebirth. This appears to be a logical connection: it was the Nun which rejuvenated the sleeping, and where the dead reappeared in a new form of life.<sup>12</sup>

It is therefore not surprising that water was considered the most significant means of purification. Its connotations with life meant that it was an entirely positive force in Egyptian culture.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, its importance can be demonstrated in the emergence of the epithet *nw wr*, or the Great or High Nun. This became an aspect of individual gods from the New Kingdom, particularly Amun and Ptah. Papyrus Berlin 3048 presents the High Nun as Ptah, ‘who does create the food offerings’. Amun is likewise presented as a provider of food in royal decrees of Pinodjem and Neskhonsu, describing him as the ‘High Nun who emerges at

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<sup>8</sup> Heiden (2003), p. 309.

<sup>9</sup> Bickel (2005), p. 191.

<sup>10</sup> Rotsch (2005), p. 229.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p. 230.

<sup>12</sup> Bickel (2005), p. 191.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. p. 192.

his due time'.<sup>14</sup> The epithet here emphasises the rejuvenating nature of both the gods it becomes associated with and the cosmic forces it invokes, consequently demonstrating the symbolic significance of water. Allusions to the inundation were often made in rituals too,<sup>15</sup> further suggesting that there was an awareness of the revitalising potential of the inundation, and an eagerness to incorporate this imagery in order to emphasise the aim of the invocation.

This suggestion can further be explained by the associations made between the Nile and Osiris.<sup>16</sup> By the end of the Late Period, Osiris was the principal figure of Egyptian funerary beliefs, largely because of the nature in which he was revived after death.<sup>17</sup> Papyrus Rhind mentions 'lustral water' from Elephantine, near where Osiris was supposedly buried at Biga Island.<sup>18</sup> According to the Coffin Texts, the deceased who bathed in water issued from Osiris were then associated with him, acquiring divine attributes.<sup>19</sup>

In particular, CT94, Osiris is 'remade' from the 'efflux which was in his flesh'.<sup>20</sup> The Nile efflux, *rDw*, was physically the flood, and symbolically the life force of the god Hapy. Libations were therefore essential in funerary contexts as they revitalised the deceased, allowing them to become youthful.<sup>21</sup> This can be demonstrated by a scene at the temple of Osiris at Abydos. Horus and Thoth libate Seti I, pouring *anx* and *was* signs over him, thereby 'conferring life and divine power'.<sup>22</sup> Such scenes are representative of the regenerative qualities of water which are symbolically transferred through libation to the deceased, enabling them to continue to live in the afterlife.

Moreover, from around the New Kingdom, water used in rituals was said to have come from the Nun: in a nineteenth dynasty ritual outlined in the Cairo Papyrus, it is stated

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<sup>14</sup> Rotsch (2005), pp. 231-232.

<sup>15</sup> Poo (2010), p. 5.

<sup>16</sup> Delia (1992), p. 182.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. p. 185.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. p. 183.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. pp. 183-184.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. p. 183.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. p. 184.

that ‘what is in the Nun’<sup>23</sup> will be brought as an offering,<sup>24</sup> highlighting that now the Nun was represented in a physical manifestation, providing a force of *HkA* which could be invoked and activated in rituals. The Greco Roman period in particular saw the increase in use of objects known as Horus Cippus stelae,<sup>25</sup> which were activated by pouring such water over the object, which was then drunk by the one who was invoking its power.<sup>26</sup> Intended to cure snake and scorpion bites, the artefact depicts a young Horus facing forward standing on two crocodiles, holding back snakes and other wild animals.<sup>27</sup> The inscriptions make it clear that the amulets are activated by libation and that they invoke the protection of Isis as the role of mother in the Osirian mythology. In particular, she healed Horus when he was bitten by a snake, and so the stela acts as both a ritual ingredient and a deterrent against dangerous creatures.<sup>28</sup> The water used in this ritual was to be consumed,<sup>29</sup> reiterating its revitalising properties. Although a symbolic action, the consumption of this water, infused with *HkA*, demonstrates the way in which it could be used as a positive, regenerative force, echoing the powers of the Nun and the purifying temple rituals.

Water was also seen as a source of pleasure. In Papyrus Westcar, the priest Djadjaemankh suggests that the king organises a group of girls to row up and down the lake in order to ‘refresh’ his mind.<sup>30</sup> The imagery here is all beautiful, natural, floral descriptions which further emphasise the intention of relaxation and enjoying one’s self. Imagery of fishing and fowling in a funerary context were laced with erotic symbolism with a focus on rebirth and indeed this is reflected in the literature.<sup>31</sup> The Tale of the Herdsman refers to a

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<sup>23</sup> pr.t m N W.

<sup>24</sup> Rotsch (2005), p. 233.

<sup>25</sup> See appendix Fig. 1.

<sup>26</sup> Ritner (1989), pp. 106-107.

<sup>27</sup> Seele (1947), pp. 43-44; Fig 3.

<sup>28</sup> Hart (1986), p. 88.

<sup>29</sup> Frankfurter (1998), p. 107.

<sup>30</sup> Simpson & Ritner (2003), p. 16.

<sup>31</sup> Booth (2005), p. 350; Loprieno (2005), p. 30.

water spell, which reads here more like a “pastoral fertility poem” than a spell,<sup>32</sup> further emphasising the beneficial nature of water and the tranquillity it can provide in a pastoral setting. The eighteenth dynasty text on the ‘Pleasures of Fowling and Fishing’ also emphasises the enriching qualities of water and praises ‘idyllic pleasures.’<sup>33</sup> There is a distinct appreciation for the life and harmony provided by pastoral settings, which complements the function of water as a vital resource in society. A fishing scene from the tomb of Montuemhat in Thebes utilises the necessity of water whilst hinting towards its danger.<sup>34</sup> The fish are speared in the water, encompassing both the death of a creature and sustenance of the fisherman. These scenes first appeared in the Old Kingdom, going out of fashion towards the nineteenth dynasty until they were revived in the twenty-fifth dynasty as a part of a reflection of the past.<sup>35</sup> The revival of scenes like this indicate that there was an appreciation for the idyllic values they portrayed, further generating a respect and admiration of these qualities of water which would otherwise be missing.

However, the Egyptian records rarely record anything negative, and so the official records ignore the negative connotations that come with water. Texts never record how someone dies, and the Nile as a source of disaster seems to be only mentioned in comparisons.<sup>36</sup> Although it was a significant provider of life, it had the potential for incredible danger and one of the ‘most frightening possibilities’ of death.<sup>37</sup> Storms, plague, floods and rain had catastrophic consequences for the Egyptians. Disasters, such as a great flood during the 6<sup>th</sup> year of Taharqo’s reign, were commemorated in a positive manner,

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<sup>32</sup> Loprieno (2005), p. 30.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. p. 32.

<sup>34</sup> Robins (2008), p. 220.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Bickel (2005), p. 193.

<sup>37</sup> Muhlestein (2005), p. 179.

paralleled with the cosmogony surrounding the Nun. Consequently, they were often reflected upon as a new beginning.<sup>38</sup>

Moreover, drowning was such a frequent occurrence that special conceptions were developed in order to allow the drowned, whose bodies would be lost and therefore would not receive a proper burial, a guaranteed access into the afterlife.<sup>39</sup> If someone lost their body in such a way, its consequent destruction meant that there would be no afterlife, and therefore their existence, and the practices of the funerary cult, would be compromised.<sup>40</sup> In Papyrus Westcar, the wife of the Ubainer is burnt, destroying her body and denying her an afterlife, then scattered on the Nile as a method of ensuring that she cannot receive any of her burial rites. In the Osirian mythology, Osiris' body is rescued from the Nile. This is done not to ensure that he lives, but rather that he can be buried properly and receive an afterlife.<sup>41</sup> It is clear that the necessity for a body in the afterlife was a fundamental principal of Egyptian society,<sup>42</sup> and so its loss or destruction could be described as an ultimate death.

There was no afterlife for the many that drowned, and so the funerary cults adapted in order to make allowances for this. This can perhaps be best emphasised by the Book of Gates, a text similar to the Amduat concerning the twelve hours of night of the solar journey.<sup>43</sup> The fifty-eighth scene, and central motif, of the ninth hour portrays a lake of water containing four types of the drowned. These are labelled as ones who are submerged, capsized, swimming and spread out. Here they benefit from the regenerative properties of the Nun, their *ba* remaining intact. Their noses are also clearly depicted, demonstrating that they can breathe.<sup>44</sup> Ra addresses these deceased, stating that their *ba* are 'pleased with what you are

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<sup>38</sup> Bickel (2005), pp. 195-196.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. p. 192.

<sup>40</sup> Loprieno (2005); Muhlestein (2005), p. 177.

<sup>41</sup> Muhlestein (2005), p. 177.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Hornung (1999), p. 59.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. p. 162; Hornung (2005), p. 64.

breathing, without them decaying,<sup>45</sup> demonstrating that despite their bodies being lost, allowances have been made in order to accept these people into the afterlife.

It is also interesting to note that water in the third hour is presented as a lake of fire, which is damaging to the damned but benefits the ‘provisioned dead’.<sup>46</sup> In the fourth hour, the lake of life is guarded by jackals: ‘the bau of the dead cannot approach’ it and so it is protected from any force.<sup>47</sup> The imagery here indicates the unique nature of water and how it affects something as fundamental as funerary culture. Although it has these refreshing, life-giving qualities, it is essentially a danger and where possible, it should be treated with the caution and respect it is given in the Book of Gates.

Furthermore, the danger of water is loosely reflected in mythology. The Nun in the mythical sphere is located outside of the order of creation, and so is by definition, outside of order.<sup>48</sup> The Pyramid Texts and the Late Period Monument of Memphite Theology also mention the drowning of Osiris,<sup>49</sup> whose recovery facilitated the potential of life after death, rather than rejuvenation.<sup>50</sup> The battles between Horus and Seth, in particular when Seth transforms into a hippo and their race across the Nile, also indicates that water is a dangerous element. When Seth is defeated, his blood runs into the Nile, turning the river red.<sup>51</sup> His destruction within the body of the Nile under the guise of a hippopotamus reveals two things: although water is portrayed as a source of rejuvenation its powers are primarily symbolic; the Nile is also home to threats other than the possibility of drowning.

In this instance, the hippopotamus is possibly considered one of the most potentially dangerous creatures in the Nile. Residing primarily in the marshes of the Delta, it was a

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<sup>45</sup> Hornung (2005), p. 163.

<sup>46</sup> Hornung (1999), p. 60.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.; Hornung (2005), p. 129.

<sup>48</sup> Loprieno (2005), p. 28.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. pp. 28-29.

<sup>50</sup> Muhlestein (2005), p. 177.

<sup>51</sup> Dils (1993), p. 120.

largely peaceful creature considered a threat by people.<sup>52</sup> This fear stemmed from its overbearing size and its aggression when threatened.<sup>53</sup> It was also the only true enemy of the crocodile in Egypt,<sup>54</sup> making its place as a ‘Sethian animal’<sup>55</sup> a justifiable representation. The crocodile, however, was utilised in stories as a ‘symbol of all maliciousness,’<sup>56</sup> and so its ferocious nature is utilised to emphasise danger. This is perhaps most evident in Papyrus Westcar, where a crocodile of wax is used to emphasise the dangers of swimming and is eventually used in the downfall of the townsman,<sup>57</sup> who is taken into the lake and presumably drowned. This is later reiterated at the end of the papyrus, when a maid is snatched by a crocodile as she goes to tell the king of the three children born to Ruddjedet.<sup>58</sup>

Crocodiles are also depicted on the Horus Cippus stelae,<sup>59</sup> demonstrating that they are a powerful force whose power is both invoked and suppressed by Isis and the child Horus. Seth also attacked Horus under the guise of a crocodile after attacking him with scorpions,<sup>60</sup> indicating that there was a connection in mythology between the protective nature of the Cippus, which invokes the healing abilities of Isis, and the destructive nature of the creatures the artefacts display, in particular crocodiles. It is also perhaps out of respect for such creatures that gods are portrayed with animal manifestations: these portrayals would extract the element of power and respect held by such animals and so they can be revered in a similar way. In the Greco-Roman period, men would place clay crocodiles in small lead coffins with names of power and the names of their wives inscribed on them, in order to keep their wives from cuckolding them.<sup>61</sup> This manner of invoking *HkA* is similar to the use of wax models to

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<sup>52</sup> Jong (2001), p. 100.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. p. 101; Brunner-Trout (2001), p. 321.

<sup>55</sup> Velde (1977), p. 26.

<sup>56</sup> Booth (2005), p. 348.

<sup>57</sup> Simpson (2003), p. 16.

<sup>58</sup> Booth (2005), p. 352; Simpson & Ritner (2003), p. 24.

<sup>59</sup> Walter Museum: Horus Cippus stela. Accession number: 22.173. Available from <http://art.thewalters.org/detail/39655/horus-stele-cippus/>.

<sup>60</sup> Ritner (1989), p. 105.

<sup>61</sup> Pinch (2006), p. 97.

invoke various gods during this period,<sup>62</sup> indicating that crocodiles were creatures worthy of respect in Ancient Egypt; their images were used in rituals in a similar way as invocations of deities, demonstrating that there was an element of danger. This is further reminiscent of Papyrus Westcar, where a crocodile of wax is thrown into the water, becoming the threat in the case of the adulterous wife.

However, perhaps one of the most widespread dangers of water in Ancient Egypt was the constant threat of disease. Many of these diseases were caused by parasites in the water and can only be attested now through the analysis of mummies. In particular, the mummy of the weaver Nakht was unfortunate enough to display symptoms of a handful of these diseases, which has illuminated the extent of the dangers which were caused by parasites in the water.

Ova of a parasite causing schistosomiasis were found in his liver, intestines and kidneys. This disease may have caused Symmer's Fibrosis in some cases: representations of Akhenaten's chief sculptor, Bak, demonstrate symptoms of the disease.<sup>63</sup> There were also lice eggs found in his hair, remnants of epidemic typhus. Hair was usually shaved to eliminate this problem, and soldiers' hair was likely to have been cut short to minimise the risk.<sup>64</sup> Finally, Nakht's intestines also contained taenia solium eggs, or pork tapeworm.<sup>65</sup>

Filariasis, a disease caused by thread-like worms which eventually causes swelling and thickened skin, is more difficult to detect as it does not affect the bones, but it can be seen in representations. The Queen of Punt is a particularly plausible sufferer.<sup>66</sup> Guinea worm in particular may have been a painful parasite to endure. The worm grows up to a meter in length, settling in the legs. It causes ulceration and blisters, which burst when the foot is immersed in water. Mummy 1770 had sores associated with the worm, along with smaller

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Heagren, (2005), pp. 151-152.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid. pp. 154-155.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid. pp. 156-157.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid. pp. 155-156.

male worms found in the remains. Ebers Papyrus outlines the treatment for Guinea worm: it was wound out using a stick and the area was to be kept clean and bandaged during this process, which lasted about three weeks.<sup>67</sup> There were three diseases caused by water which were of particular danger to armies on campaign: malaria, typhus and poliomyelitis, a disease predominantly associated with childhood, which caused deformities in the leg.<sup>68</sup>

Heagren's list of water-related diseases demonstrates that there was a constant threat to Egyptian society in almost every aspect of life.<sup>69</sup> It is likely that many people died or suffered greatly because of the unsanitary condition of water, made more dangerous during times of Low Nile Tide. The term *jAdt rnpt*, or 'yearly plague' emerged: during times of low water the most diseases appear to have been contracted too.<sup>70</sup> The highest mortality rate in nineteenth century Cairo was recorded in March and April, when the water table was at its lowest.<sup>71</sup> It is therefore almost certain that the same problems with parasites and diseases would have arisen as a result of the low water table. It is not surprising that from the Old Kingdom this period of low tide was associated with death, rather than the connotations of life the flood brought with it.<sup>72</sup>

The tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor can also be used to explain the potential for death and demonstrates the extent of the power of water. As the result of a storm, the boat sinks, leaving one survivor, who is carried to an island 'by a wave of the sea.'<sup>73</sup> The threats of water seem to be an underlying theme in such texts of the Middle Kingdom.<sup>74</sup> The Shipwrecked Sailor is unable to completely avoid such a catastrophe, but survives nonetheless, whilst the Eloquent Peasant urges the steward not to 'taste the evil/peril of the river.'<sup>75</sup> With the dangers

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<sup>67</sup> Heagren (2005), pp. 153-154.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid. pp. 156-157.

<sup>69</sup> Heagren (2005).

<sup>70</sup> Bickel (2005), p. 198.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid. p. 199.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid. p. 198.

<sup>73</sup> Blackman (1972), p. 42; Simpson & Ritner (2003), p. 48. (*Rdj.kw(j) r jw jn wAw n*)

<sup>74</sup> Loprieno (2005), p. 28.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.; Simpson & Ritner (2003), p. 29. (*Nn dp=k Dw.t n.t jtrw*).

presented by crocodiles, these examples indicate that despite the idealism of fishing and fowling scenes, there was a constant threat posed by water, whether it was contained within the Nile or out at sea. It was therefore something which needed to be respected. In the Shipwrecked Sailor, it was the god who saved the sailor by appearing to him. The Eloquent Peasant shares his wisdom with the steward in his appeals, potentially saving him from danger.

Records in Deir el-Medina also reveal that water was used in trials. The phrase ‘taken to the river’ appears, but it is unclear as to what this alludes to. It may be that their sentence is to be drowned.<sup>76</sup> Interrogations also took place there, in the case of the great tomb robberies,<sup>77</sup> demonstrating that it could be seen as a symbol of both great power and the threat of punishment. In military campaigns, armies left and returned via the Nile,<sup>78</sup> using it as a positive, victorious force whilst also demonstrating the potential destructive qualities. Enemies were tied to the prow of ships upon successful campaigns; an action recorded in detail by Tutankhamun at Karnak, and Amenhotep III in Amarna and Elephantine.<sup>79</sup> These scenes outline a more sinister nature encompassing victory processions on the Nile. The destruction of foreign power was represented by the enemies’ undignified portrayal on the ships and it is therefore not surprising that the smiting scene can be seen on representations of royal barques, such as in the tombs of Akhenaten, Ramesses III and Herihor.<sup>80</sup> Such representations reveal the harsh, destructive qualities of Egyptian victory and in particular, the way in which water was used to advertise these qualities.

Allusions to water are also made in reference to women. The Teachings of Ptahhotep in Papyrus Butler is concerned about the treatment of his wife, evoking the potential dangers

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<sup>76</sup> Muhlestein (2005), pp. 175-176.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid. p. 176.

<sup>78</sup> Muhlestein (2005), p. 173.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid. pp. 173-174.

<sup>80</sup> Muhlestein (2005), pp. 174-175.

of ‘untamed water.’ In this comparison, it is ‘a woman left to herself,’<sup>81</sup> and so he alludes to the whimsical, unpredictable nature of water. This aspect is also utilised in some love poems to emphasise the lengths people would go for their loved ones. In one poem, the narrator states ‘I enter the water and brave the waves,’<sup>82</sup> whilst Loprieno notes that others used water to emphasise a new perspective on purification, with heavy religious overtones.<sup>83</sup>

Ramesside literature in particular seems to highlight the negative aspect of water and regards it with a degree of scepticism, whilst the New Kingdom in general appears to have focused on how it was both a vital and dangerous element.<sup>84</sup> Wenamun’s ship is robbed during an expedition to Dor,<sup>85</sup> where he is forced to stay for 9 days, that the prince may help search for the thief.<sup>86</sup> It is by the water that this event takes place, not as a result of it, indicating that although it was a problematic and dangerous force, water was not the direct cause of many problems, rather a circumstance. In the case of Papyrus Westcar, it is the crocodile that is the true threat, not the lake. The fifth dynasty autobiographical text of Kaemtjanet demonstrates the dangers of sailing on the Nile in a storm.<sup>87</sup> Again, it is the storm which causes the problems, not the Nile itself.

Water, especially the Nile, was a powerful force in Ancient Egypt. From the New Kingdom onwards, its function became more prominent in religion as the mythology of the Ennead developed and more stories concerning the death of Osiris emerged. Consequently the importance of the Nile, which was also assimilated with the primeval Nun, was elevated to such a position that it was now an embodiment of power and creation. Despite the dangers and the constant threat of death and disease water posed, and still poses, to Egyptian society,

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<sup>81</sup> Loprieno (2005), p. 31.

<sup>82</sup> Booth (2005), p. 349; Lichtheim (1976), p. 193.

<sup>83</sup> Loprieno (2005), p. 37.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid. p. 35.

<sup>85</sup> Gardiner (1932), p. 62. (*twj Tay-tw n tAy=k mr*).

<sup>86</sup> Ibid. p. 63.

<sup>87</sup> Loprieno (2005), pp. 27-28.

it was used in rituals as an effective ingredient to invoke its positive aspects, rather than to accentuate the negative connotations.

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Written for *Ancient Egyptian Magic and Ritual (CLE-335)*

### **Appendix: Image**

**Figure 1: British Museum: Horus Cippus stela. Accession number: EA 60958.**



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