

PYRAMID



Issue 3/11 September '09

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THE TEMPLE OF SOBEK, THE CROCODILE GOD

BY S.E. MORTIMER

I am Sobek, who dwelleth amid his terrors.

I am Sobek, and I seize my prey like a ravening beast.

I am the great Fish which is in Kamui.

I am the lord to whom bowings and prostrations are made in Sekhem.

And the Osiris Ani is the lord to whom bowings and prostrations are made in Sekhem.

– *The Book of the Dead*

The Nile River was the lifeblood of ancient Egypt. It was the principal trade route and the benefactor of many fishermen. It provided resources such as fresh water for washing and drinking, papyrus for making paper, mud for making bricks, and so on. Each year, the river flooded its banks, revitalizing the land and granting bountiful harvests.

In addition, the Nile was full of crocodiles, which could make things difficult for people trying to earn a living on or near the river. Keeping the god Sobek – the crocodile god – pleased ensured that the god's reptilian servants left his human worshippers alone. Furthermore, the god controlled the waters. Pleasing Sobek also meant that the river would continue to bless the land and its people.

In Pliny and Plutarch's writings, the crocodile was seen as a prophet of the annual inundation – the females could anticipate the degree of the coming flood and lay their eggs just above the high-water mark.

Sobek was also considered a fierce hunter and he became the patron of the army. The crocodile's strength and speed was thought to symbolize the power of the Pharaoh; the hieroglyph of a crocodile was even used to represent the word "sovereign" or "ruler."

River towns and cities revered Sobek, but none more so than Arsinoe (which Egyptians called *Shedyet* or *El-Fayoum*); so great was the love of the crocodile god that the Greeks renamed it Crocodilopolis.

THE TEMPLE OF SOBEK

Although the ancient Egyptian deities are no longer worshiped as they were thousands of years ago, it can be useful to understand how they existed back then. Were Sobek to become actively worshipped again, it might be reasonable (and dramatically appropriate) for his followers to revive the old traditions.

Egyptian temple layouts are similar regardless of the gods involved, and the structure was prescribed by Egyptian religious tradition. Visitors to a temple typically approach along a causeway that leads into a large open-air colonnaded courtyard. This is followed by a series of enclosed rooms that gradually diminish in size. Smaller rooms mean more restricted access. The general public is permitted into the courtyard, but only supplicants are permitted to venture into the larger rooms, and officials alone go deeper into the complex.

Columns surround the courtyard, and on its grounds is a large altar or statue of the crocodile god. This leads to the largest enclosed room, which is used to sort out potential supplicants. Only temple officials are permitted to go further inside – to a smaller room that serves as a vestibule to the dimly lit sanctuary beyond. The sanctuary houses the statue of the god where the High Priest performs his sacred rites.

Priests use mummified remains of crocodiles and other animals in their rituals. These remains are stored in deep niches in the inner walls when not in use. Some sites also have catacombs under the building where thousands more mummified animals are entombed.

Some temples keep live crocodiles that live pampered lives. Tame crocodiles dwell in pools where they are hand-fed with honey cakes and choice cuts of meat, and ornamented with gold and jewels. These lucky creatures live in the Sacred Lake – a pool located in the courtyard or just outside and enclosed with a fence or hedge to keep visitors from getting too close.

Justifications to go to the Temple of Sobek in modern campaigns include: religious artifacts (especially biblical ties between Judea and Egypt) and modern-day secrets (there's always turmoil in the Middle East, and no one would suspect hiding current schemes in an ancient temple).

THE CULT OF SOBEK

The bottom of the temple hierarchy is composed of ordinary priests who are called Pure Ones. They perform most of the mundane activities involved with running the temple. Members of the next rank are known as Servants of the Gods. These men are assistants to the next rank – Fathers of the Gods – who make most of the more important decisions. Commanding them all is the High Priest, who is the pharaoh's appointed representative. He performs the most important rituals and acts as chief administrator. All priests take great care to maintain their purity. This involves bathing twice each day and twice each night using water from the Sacred Lake and shaving off all bodily hair once every three days.

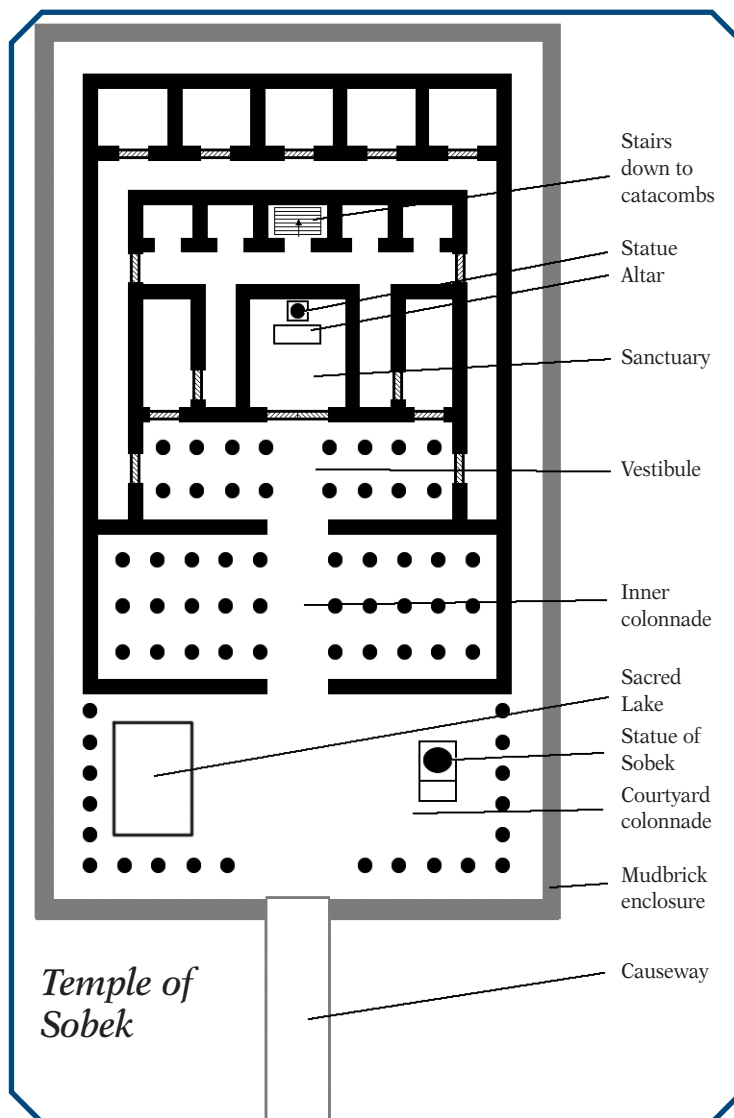
Every day, offerings are made to Sobek, represented by a statue of a man with the head of a crocodile. The life-sized statue is located in the temple sanctuary in a shrine called a *naos*. The idol itself is not worshipped; it is used as a means of channeling prayers and offerings to the god, after being first consecrated via a ritual called "Opening the Eyes and Mouth" (see boxed text on p. 23). A larger statue of the god stands out in the courtyard, and it is to this statue that the common people make their offerings.

Morning Service

The daily ritual begins before dawn when temple priests and their servants prepare meals and offerings of flowers, oils, and incense arranged neatly on platters. Next, all implements are cleansed with natron and water from the Sacred Lake, as is each person entering the temple. Here the public can stand and watch the priests make their way slowly and reverently through to the vestibule, where the priests sing hymns, burn incense, chant, and play sistrums. Only the pharaoh or his appointed deputy (usually the High Priest) is permitted to enter the inner sanctuary and "waken" the god.

Awakening the God

The High Priest breaks the seal on the sanctuary door and unties the cord fastening the doorknobs. The double doors are opened and the priest enters slowly, bowing regularly. When in front of the statue, he kisses the ground and begins singing hymns with raised arms. More incense is burned while the statue is washed and dressed in a robe consisting of four layers of cloth of varying length and color (after removing clothing from the previous day). According to some texts, each color served a different purpose: White cloth safeguarded against enemies, blue hid the face of the god, green gave him health, and red protected him. Ideally, the final layer is always placed just as the sun lifts above the horizon. The ritual is completed by anointing the head with oil and applying eye paint. When finished, the priest backs out of the room carrying yesterday's offerings, while bowing and sweeping away footprints. The



doors are closed and tied with rope, a ball of clay is wrapped around the knot, and a seal is pressed into it to prevent tampering. Every aspect of this ritual – from preparation of the fire before burning the incense, to tying the knot and applying the seal – is described in great detail in a temple manuscript, which is secured in a locked room along with the various ritual implements.

Supplication

Supplicants are screened in the inner colonnade. Some wait quietly for their turn to approach the altar in the courtyard, where an accompanying priest interprets the god's response to their prayers. Some altars are hollow; according to archeologists' theories, a priest could hide inside such an altar before the supplicants entered, which would allow him to pretend to be Sobek and speak directly to the supplicants. Other statues have mechanics for moving the statue's arms or mouth.

GURPS Egypt offers additional details about the topic country, which could become clues to mysterious treasure or knowledge.

Opening the Eyes and Mouth

A means of consecrating a statue so that it can receive the god, this ritual involves the use of a sacred tool to touch the eyes and mouth of the statue. When completed, the spirit within the statue was able to see, to receive food and drink, and to breathe. Tools used for this ritual were carved from semi-precious stone; possible tools were a forked blade, a serpent-headed blade, or an adze-shaped blade. A large animal such as a bull is sacrificed during the ritual and select parts are offered to the idol. Afterwards, the bull's remains would either be mummified and entombed, or cooked and eaten in a feast.

Other supplicants can make an offering at one of the many tiny shrines throughout the complex. Some walls of the temple are specially reserved for people to write their names upon, along with a specific request or a more general note of devotion.

Before anyone can make a devotion, however, he must first be purified. Usually, the person was anointed with oil and cleansed with water from the Sacred Lake.

Unlike many gods, who were called upon to perform miraculous healings, worshipers of Sobek were more likely to ask for strength or protection. A merchant might ask Sobek to guard his caravan during a long trading expedition, or a mother might ask the crocodile god to protect her son serving in the military.

Incubation

Some supplicants are permitted to sleep in the temple in the hope that Sobek will visit them in a dream. This process of "sleeping in" was common in many ancient religions and was called *enkoimesis* or *incubatio* by the Greeks. Supplicants sleep on the floor of the temple; when they awake, they describe their dreams to a priest who would offer an interpretation.

Sobek's Chosen

When anyone, be he Egyptian or foreigner, is known to have been carted off by a crocodile or drowned by the river itself, such a one must by all means be embalmed and tended as fairly as may be and buried in a sacred coffin by the townsmen of the place where he is cast up; nor may his kinfolk or his friends touch him, but his body is deemed something more than human, and is handled and buried by the priests of the Nile themselves.

— Herodotus, II.90

Anyone killed by a crocodile is considered sacred to Sobek, and nobody is permitted to touch the body except for Sobek's priests. The body is treated reverently; it is bathed and anointed, then mummified and buried. Relatives and loved ones take no part in the ritual but can participate in the burial.

Other Rituals

On some days, other rituals are performed. If any live crocodiles are kept in the temple, then the care and feed-

ing of these also have their own rituals. Sometimes people want the priests to prepare and bury a loved one or a family pet. Throughout the year, worshipers celebrate significant religious days with animal sacrifice and a feast. Once each year the statue of Sobek is taken out of his sanctuary and prepared for its annual procession.

ACTION!

The Temple of Sobek and its associated cult would make an ideal "place of action." The building could be scaled to any size necessary; underneath might lurk a maze of catacombs where mummified crocodiles, priests, and sacrificial victims (usually other animals) are entombed. The temple can form part of a larger complex that includes libraries, hospitals, classrooms, museums, and administration buildings. Entire cities can be constructed around particularly significant temples. Temple guards can protect the area, outfitted in crocodile hide armor (see below) and bearing pole arms and sidearms, such as swords or axes. The priests take on a darker aspect if they sacrifice *people* to their god instead of animals. They might turn to such practices if facing a disaster – perhaps a prolonged drought after the nearby river failed to flood for many years. Finally, the GM can replace the altar in the sanctuary with a hole in the floor, leading to a crocodile-filled pool in the catacombs underneath.

MODERN TIMES

Once Christianity became the official religion of Rome, many of the pagan cults were either subsumed into this new religion – with patron saints replacing pagan gods – or they were driven underground and practiced in secret.

Crocodile Hide Armor

A thigh-length corselet and helmet made from crocodile hide was excavated from Manfalut in Egypt. This object dates to the third century, and it currently resides in the British Museum. It is unclear whether it was worn as ceremonial garb during Sobek's religious rites or if temple guards used it as actual armor. Crocodile hide would make decent leather armor and there is no reason to think that it could not be used in combat. It looks like a sleeveless jacket with a short collar and shoulder guards that closes in front and reaches down to cover the abdomen and groin. In *GURPS*, this is heavy leather armor with DR 3 against all attacks except impaling (DR 2); cost \$200, weight 20 lbs. The helmet is hardened medium leather with DR 2 against *all* attacks and a long guard that protects the back of the neck; cost \$29, weight 3.5 lbs.

Got a great location, but now you need some protagonists? Find inspiration in the GURPS Action series.

For dramatic purposes, it's best to assume the Cult of Sobek has become one of the latter.

Over the course of nearly two millennia the cult has undergone some changes. Once the temple stood prominent, the center of a large city with its priests being respected citizens. Now temples are constructed in secret, in the darker places of a modern city or in remote locations. Its gates, once open to all comers, are heavily guarded. Now, only the initiated are welcome to make an offering and receive the god's blessing and guidance. Where once the god was satisfied with offerings of fruit, cakes, and scented oil, he now requires the flesh and blood of human sacrifices.

There, in every place one crocodile is kept, trained to be tame; they put ornaments of glass and gold on its ears and bracelets on its forefeet, provide for it special food and offerings, and give the creatures the best of treatment while they live; after death the crocodiles are embalmed and buried in sacred coffins.

— Herodotus, II.69

ADVENTURE SEEDS

The Cult of Sobek can be the focus of an adventure in any period from Ancient Egypt through to modern times. In ancient times, Sobek formed part of the religious pantheon and was openly worshipped. Modern adventurers would discover a darker and more secretive cult.

Ancient

Supplicant: The heroes need to make a request of the crocodile god, perhaps to advance a subplot or resolve another adventure. The plea could involve blessing an item (say, by granting it a magical ability), or asking the god to make a prediction or tell the whereabouts of a missing loved one. Wealthier supplicants are expected to make more valuable

offerings. The GM should determine how effective the offering is (assuming it's possible to communicate with Sobek at all, of course). Two things need to be taken into account: the wealth of the PC, and the significance of the request. Sobek would be far more receptive to a poor farmer who offered half of his entire harvest than to a wealthy adventurer who offered a similar amount in gold. Rather than providing a fixed price, the GM should encourage the players to have their characters determine their own offering. Imaginative offerings should be rewarded, even if their monetary value is lower.

Annual Festival: Each year the priests of Sobek brush off the dusty trinkets and idols and bring the crocodile god to the people in a procession through the city. This is the largest celebration of the year – pilgrims, merchants, and swindlers come from far and wide to participate in the action.

Eerie Idol: The adventurers have a client whose deceased husband bequeathed some of her jewelry to the local temple of Sobek in his will. She wants one of the pieces back and will pay a price far higher than what it appears to be worth. They discover that the item in question is adorning one of the priests' pet crocodiles – a very large and mean-looking crocodile. Even if they manage to recover the jewelry, once they realize why their client wants the strange-looking item, they may not wish to hand it over.

Rogue: Every year, crocodiles kill a few dozen people living or working near the river. Over the last year or so, this number has increased fourfold! The people are saying that Sobek has abandoned them and are blaming the temple for not keeping him appeased. In order to head off a riot (and to save his skin), the High Priest of Sobek has instituted a new rite – human sacrifice. He tells the people that it is better to satiate Sobek's thirst for human blood in the temple with specially chosen victims than to allow him to choose victims at random in the river. At the same time, his priests identify the real cause of the problem – a particularly large and aggressive rogue crocodile. The heroes are hired to track down and kill the offending creature. They must do it under the cover of darkness and keep their activity secret. They will be killed if there is any hint that they can't keep quiet.

Blasphemy: A crocodile attacks one of the PCs. If any members of the party (including the victim) kill or wound the creature, they are arrested by priests of Sobek and charged with blasphemy. The High Priest will decide on the punishment. A Good reaction roll will result in a quest. A Neutral reaction roll will result in a large fine. A Poor reaction roll will result in significant sacrifice to the crocodile god.

Competition: Some of the other temples in the city are becoming more popular – at the expense of Sobek. This results in lost revenue for the crocodile priests. The High Priest has come up with a direct way to remove the “competition.” His acolytes kidnap priests of other religions in the middle of the night (along with any witnesses) and sacrifice them to their god. The adventurers are hired to assist in the kidnapping but are not privy to any details of the scheme, nor will they know of the sacrifices. If they ask questions, a false story will be told to allay suspicion.

Just over 100 Egyptian tombs have been found in a 450-mile-long strip of desert. Most pyramids found in modern times are in poor condition and appear only as piles of rubble.

Egyptian Crocodiles

The Nile crocodile is one of the largest freshwater crocodilians. Mature males can grow up to 20 feet in length but 12-16 feet is more typical. Weight can vary between 500 to over 1,600 lbs. Females of a similar age are typically around 20% smaller. They vary from other crocodiles in that both the mother and father ferociously protect their nest (both eggs and hatchlings), while most other crocodilians lay their eggs and move on.

A crocodile's ability to lie concealed with most of its body underwater, combined with explosive bursts of speed over short distances, makes it a superb ambusher. Crocodiles can work together to catch prey, sometimes herding fish toward a river bank or teaming up to take down prey as large as a rhinoceros. They can eat up to half their body weight in a single feeding. Once a crocodile grabs its prey, it will drag the meal-to-be into deeper water and hold it under until it drowns. They won't eat rotting meat but will scavenge fresh kills. While severe injury is a death sentence to most predators, crocodiles can survive to old age even with a missing leg or a portion of the jaw.

Nile Crocodile

Statistics are for a mature male about 15 feet in length and weighing around 1,000 lbs. Pizard's *Animalia* website can help create crocodiles of different sizes (see link below).

ST: 27 **HP:** 26 **Speed:** 6.00
DX: 12 **Will:** 10 **Move:** 4 (Ground)/7 (Water)
IQ: 3 **Per:** 12 **Weight:** 1,000 lbs.
HT: 12 **FP:** 13 **SM:** +2
Dodge: 10 **Parry:** N/A **DR:** 3 (2 underbelly)

Bite (14): 4d crushing. Reach C, 1.

Tail (14): 3d+2 crushing. Reach C-3.

Traits: Amphibious; Breath-Holding 4; Cold-Blooded (65° F); Combat Reflexes; Discriminatory Smell; Gluttony (12); Hard to Kill 2; Hard to Subdue 2; Incompetence (Climbing); Low Empathy; Night Vision 5; No Fine Manipulators; Peripheral Vision; Quadruped; Reduced Consumption 2 (Cast-Iron Stomach); Restricted Diet (Carnivore); Striker (Tail; Crushing; Long +2; Cannot Parry; Weak); Striking ST +6 (Bite only); Wild Animal.

Features: Born Biter 1*; Scales.

Skills: Brawling-14; Intimidation-10; Running (Sprinting)-14†; Stealth-14; Survival ((River/Stream))-12; Swimming-14; Tracking-15.

* *GURPS Martial Arts*, p. 115

† *Optional specialty* (p. B169) that does not apply to paced running.

Modern

Sacrifice: A dependant of one of the heroes disappears while visiting a small town. After investigation, the party discovers that other visitors have also gone missing in the past. The trail leads to a secret temple complex where the missing victims are sacrificed to the crocodile god. The dependant will be sacrificed during the next new moon. A major complication is the discovery that prominent community leaders (such as the mayor and the sheriff) are secret members of the cult.

Zoo Escape: All of the crocodiles in the enclosure of a large metropolitan zoo escaped during the night. Bloody remains belonging to one of the zoo attendants are discovered floating in the pool. Initially, it looks as though he was mauled by a croc, but forensic investigation throws up some inconsistencies. Public panic ensues after the local media gets involved. The next night, the zoo's security guard does not show up for work. In fact, he is a recruit for a new branch of the Cult of Sobek, which is about to be consecrated in an abandoned car assembly plant in the run-down industrial part of town.

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He said he was like a crocodile. You never knew whether he was trying to smile or preparing to swallow you up.

– Winston Churchill

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

S.E. Mortimer has a post-graduate degree in Classical Studies and is a part-time writer. She developed an interest in *GURPS* through her partner, Dan Howard, and they have both written material for Steve Jackson Games. She lives in Maitland, Australia, with her family of three children and a cat. Other interests include researching her infamous English ancestors, gardening, and scrapbooking.