

Setne and the Book of Thoth: Knowledge Kept with the Dead

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Setne seeks a book attributed to Thoth inside a tomb. The dead recount what its earlier theft cost them, but the promise of forbidden knowledge proves harder to resist than their warning.

STATUS	Ptolemaic literary tale about an earlier prince; magical book is a narrative object
CLASSIFICATION	STR
MATERIAL	Memphis and Coptos, Egypt
DISPOSITION	PUBLIC / SOURCED STORY
CATEGORY	Strange Files
RECORD TYPE	Ancient stories
STORY HISTORY	Surviving Demotic tale from the Ptolemaic period, 305-30 BCE

THE ACCOUNT

The book is already lying with the dead when Setne comes for it. In the Demotic tale, the spirit Ahura explains how her family obtained the writing of Thoth and paid with their lives. Its power promises extraordinary knowledge of the world. Her account should be enough to stop another reader. Instead, Setne takes the book, and a sequence of humiliation and terror eventually drives him to restore it and help reunite the dead.

FOLLOWING THE TRAIL

The main surviving manuscript belongs to the Ptolemaic period, centuries after the historical prince Khaemwaset, son of Ramesses II, on whom Setne is based. UCL research distinguishes the historical figure from this later literary adventure. W. M. Flinders Petrie's published version identifies the beginning as lost, so its reconstructed opening must not be treated as preserved ancient wording. The Book of Thoth in this story is a fictional divine object, not an authenticated volume discovered with its advertised powers.

WHY IT STAYS WITH US

The warning comes from people who have already made the mistake. Yet the story understands why a scholar might still reach for the book: a boundary around knowledge can make it more desirable. Its deepest unease is the prospect that understanding everything outside oneself may offer no protection from one's own appetite.

WHERE THIS TELLING COMES FROM

Egyptian Tales, Second Series: Setna and the Magic Book

W. M. Flinders Petrie; Project Gutenberg

<https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/7413/pg7413-images.html>

Mary Bywater thesis: discussion of Setne and the Book of Thoth

University College London

<https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/1387202/3/Bywater%20Thesis%20No%20Pictures.pdf>

RETURN TO THE STORY

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