

Animals and the divine in ancient Egypt

Animals, like gods, were very important to the ancient Egyptians in their daily lives. Rather than separating out the animals and gods, Egyptians saw animals as representatives of the gods in their world. This resulted in the tendency to picture the gods and goddesses in animal form or with the heads of animals. A wooden figurine of Anubis, the god of the afterlife and mummification, pictures him with the head of a jackal [\[Myth 37\]](#). The connection between jackals and death arose because the ancient Egyptians saw them around cemeteries. They thought the jackal was Anubis himself, watching over the dead. Anubis stands to the right of a Greek lady, on her tombstone, watching over her in her transition to the afterlife [\[Death 14\]](#).

The mother goddess Hathor, as moulded on a pot fragment [\[Myth 38\]](#), has the head or ears of a cow, showing her close connection to family and fertility. Ancient Egyptians saw the cow as a life giver, since she gave milk to her calves. A faience figurine of Sekhmet [\[Myth 28\]](#), the goddess of balance and justice, shows her with the head of a lion, because the Egyptians saw lions as the two sides of justice that the pharaohs and other gods exercised: protection and punishment. On the one hand, lions show a protective instinct towards their young; on the other hand, harsh punishment is indicated by the lion's ferocious nature. The cobra is another another protective animal who also attacks. We therefore find the protector goddess, Wadjet, in the form of a cobra, sculpted on masks and coffins [\[Egypt 8\]](#) to protect the deceased. Primarily Wadjet protected her father, Ra, who was the sun god and king of the gods. Both of these protector goddesses, Sekhmet and Wadjet, shared attributes with the pharaoh, who they protected.

Cats were useful to all Egyptians because they kept rats and other animals away from crops. This is why they saw Bast—who had the body of a woman and the head of a cat—as a protector goddess. Farmers from all over Egypt worshipped her, especially at her temple in Bubastis, where Egyptians offered her mummified cats [\[Death 1\]](#) to show how much they worshipped her but also to gain her favour.

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