

Proven by Mummies:

The Importance of Animals in Ancient Egyptian Religion

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Everyone who knows anything about Egypt knows that they really liked cats, but not everyone knows that their love for animals is much wider than just felines and has a deep connection to religion. Unlike most societies of the time, Egyptians believed that animals had souls, which placed them on the same tier as people in terms of importance. The key aspect of animals in Ancient Egyptian life was their connection to religious beliefs. Egyptians believed that each god or goddess was associated with one or more animals that shared similar behaviors. At one point in time, pilgrims brought statues of the animal connected to the god that they were praying to, but it became cheaper to buy mummies when they visited the temples. Animals started being raised in captivity in capacities similar to today's factory farming in order to keep up with the demand for the mummies. Not all animals could be raised in captivity, so sometimes fraudulent mummies existed. Modern-day technology has allowed scientists to see that some mummies were given as much care as humans, while others contained little or no real remains. The massive business of animal mummification allows people to understand the importance of animals in Ancient Egyptian religion.

Egypt is home to many varied species of animals, both domesticated and wild. The wild animals range from wild beasts such as hippos, lions and crocodiles to gazelles, baboons, snakes and scarab beetles. Egyptians were domesticating animals which included livestock, but poultry yards and aviaries had a large variation of bird species.¹ Domestic animals, such as cattle and

¹ Philippe Germond, "Beastly Fun," *Natural History* 111, no. 2 (March 2002): accessed December 3, 2017, <http://proxy-ship.klnpa.org/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=6237946&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

sheep, were raised by farmers for food, skin and milk.² Dogs and cats were commonly kept as pets by the Ancient Egyptians and were used for hunting, guarding, pest control and companionship.³

Many societies used animals strictly for food, work or other personal use; Ancient Egyptians, on the other hand, believed that animals were spiritual just like humans. There was not a distinct difference between human and non-human animals. The Egyptian language did not even have a word for “animal” until the spread of Christianity.⁴ The positioning of some animal mummies proves that they treated animals with the same importance as people. For example, there are some cat mummies that are positioned in the same way as humans, with the forepaws crossed in front of the body, which shows how they were valued very highly when compared to other societies.⁵

There is much that is not known about Ancient Egyptian religion, and the myths tend to be contradictory. The oldest form of religion is animal worship, and a national religion did not arise until the end of the Predynastic Period. The king had a connection to the gods and

² Angela Murock Hussein, "Egypt's Animal Gods," *Calliope* 20, no. 2 (October 2009): accessed December 3, 2017. <http://proxy-ship.klnpa.org/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ulh&AN=44751672&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

³ Salima Ikram, "Man's best friend for eternity: dog and human burials in ancient Egypt," *Anthropozoologica* 48, no. 2 (2013): 299, accessed December 3, 2017, <http://proxy-ship.klnpa.org/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=bxh&AN=BACD201400122206&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

⁴ Eric A. Powell, "Messengers to the Gods," *Archaeology* 67, no. 2 (March & April 2014): 52, accessed December 3, 2017. <http://proxy-ship.klnpa.org/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=94360127&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

⁵ Eric A. Powell, "Messengers to the Gods," *Archaeology* 67, no. 2 (March & April 2014): 52, accessed December 3, 2017. <http://proxy-ship.klnpa.org/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=94360127&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

translated what they told him. There was also a very strong belief in life after death, which includes the ka and ba. The ka is “a detached part of the self” while the ba is “loosely identifiable as the soul of a person.”⁶ Animals are a big part of Ancient Egyptian religion, and their mummies allow people of the modern day to better understand how important they were to the people of Ancient Egypt.

Egyptians connected gods and animals based on personality traits, behaviors or the location in which they lived. Jackals are connected to Anubis, the god of mummification because they often live around cemeteries so that they can dig up decaying bodies. Anubis is therefore shown with a jackal head, and one of the canopic jars, in which important organs are stored, has a jackal head as well.⁷ Baboons and ibises are both connected to Thoth, the god of wisdom because they are smart animals. Falcons spend most of their time in the sky, so Horus, the sky god, is connected to them.⁸ When a deity embodies itself as an animal, only one individual is alive at once, as with the Apis bull.⁹ Over time the deities were humanized, only

⁶ "Egyptian Religion." *Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia*. 6th ed. 1-3. Accessed December 3, 2017. <http://proxy-ship.klnpa.org/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mth&AN=39004516&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

⁷ Angela Murock Hussein, "Egypt's Animal Gods," *Calliope* 20, no. 2 (October 2009): accessed December 3, 2017. <http://proxy-ship.klnpa.org/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ulh&AN=44751672&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

⁸ Murock Hussein, Angela. "Egypt's Animal Gods." *Calliope* 20, no. 2 (October 2009): 18-22. Accessed December 3, 2017. <http://proxy-ship.klnpa.org/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ulh&AN=44751672&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

⁹ Paul T. Nicholson, Salima Ikram, and Steve Mills, "The Catacombs of Anubis at North Saqqara.," *Antiquity* 89, no. 345 (June 2015): 647, accessed December 3, 2017, doi:10.15184/aqy.2014.53.

keeping an animal head, but the relationship between an animal and a god was still very important.¹⁰

Almost everything that is known about the ancient world comes from writing, art, artifacts or remains. Not a lot is known about animal mummies, which is surprising since the number of different people involved is so large. The people involved in the animal mummification business included “priests, animal breeders, embalmers, and makers and sellers of bronzes, as well as those who supported them, to recognise that animal cults were a very significant economic force in Late Period Egypt.” Even though some mummies were removed from their location before their existence was documented, there are also some niches in the Dog Catacombs of Saqqara are known to have held votive bronzes that were all found to be empty. Robbers disturbed the mummies when they were likely searching for the bronze statues.¹¹ Most people would be trying to steal bronze than dead animals, so the statue sites tend to be the ones with more damage and less remaining votives. Despite the robbers and the slim amount of research to begin with, the information that is known still allows people of the modern day to understand how important the business was to Ancient Egypt in terms of the economy, as well as to their religious beliefs.

Other methods of learning about the importance of animals in religion can come from art, which can be easily misinterpreted. Egyptian sculptors had a very strict process to follow, one that included putting the head of an animal on a human body that were always “cubic and

¹⁰ "Egyptian Religion." *Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia*. 6th ed. 1-3. Accessed December 3, 2017. <http://proxy-ship.klnpa.org/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mth&AN=39004516&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

¹¹ Paul T. Nicholson, Salima Ikram and Steve Mills (2015). The Catacombs of Anubis at North Saqqara. *Antiquity*, 89, pp 645-661 doi:10.15184/aqy.2014.53

frontal.”¹² Drawings, on the other hand, allowed more freedom from the artists’ perspectives. Human roles were often played by animals in the drawings, which often portrayed satirical scenes and human to depict their message. That means that the message could also be easily lost, especially with such a large gap in time between the artists and the present day observers.

There are many reasons that an animal would be mummified, but the main reasons include cults, pets, food for the afterlife and religious offerings.¹³ There are multiple pharaohs and other forms of royalty that were buried with pets, such as Amenhotep with his hunting dog, Thutmose IV with a royal cat and a queen with a gazelle, which would allow them to be together for the rest of time.¹⁴ Additionally, here are some examples of a dog or dogs being buried “near the entry [of] a chamber filled with human bodies, as if it were guarding them.” This is likely because Anubis would help the dead get to their destination, and dogs were closely related to jackals, or at least close enough for this purpose. The complete reason is unknown though, because pets were typically only buried with one person.¹⁵

¹² William H. Peck, "Animal Symbolism in Ancient Egyptian Art," *Sculpture Review* 52, no. 2 (Summer 2003): accessed December 3, 2017.
<http://proxy-ship.klnpa.org/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=asu&AN=505079094&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

¹³ Lidiya M. McKnight, "Gifts for the Gods: Animal Mummies as Votive Offerings.," *Ancient Egypt Magazine* 16, no. 1 (Aug. & Sept. 2015): 27, accessed December 3, 2017,
<http://proxy-ship.klnpa.org/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=hus&AN=109145995&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

¹⁴ Eric A. Powell, "Messengers to the Gods," *Archaeology* 67, no. 2 (March & April 2014): 52, accessed December 3, 2017.
<http://proxy-ship.klnpa.org/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=94360127&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

¹⁵ Salima Ikram, "Man's best friend for eternity: dog and human burials in ancient Egypt," *Anthropozoologica* 48, no. 2 (2013): 303, accessed December 3, 2017,
<http://proxy-ship.klnpa.org/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=bxh&AN=BACD201400122206&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

Instead of purchasing bronze statues to bring to the temples, it became cheaper to buy animal mummies as offerings, but mummies also were a more direct way to get the attention of the god since the animals used to be living.¹⁶ The oracle creatures would answer questions that the pilgrims asked, just as before with the statues, but now there was a stronger connection between the god and the pilgrim, which was a previously living animal instead of just a chunk of bronze.¹⁷

Animal necropolises date back to the Predynastic Period, when multiple animals were buried together in simple pits for unknown reasons, either as pets, part of animal cults, or as votive offerings; however, the peak of the animal cults was from the Late Period to the Ptolemaic Period (747-30 BCE).¹⁸ The Dog Catacombs on the Saqqara plateau are the resting places of many dogs of all ages and sizes. Jackals, foxes, ichneumon (mongoose), cats, jungle cats and falcons were also found, likely because “all ‘dog-like’ creatures were interchangeable.” Most of them were in very poor condition as they only received cursory mummification with minimal

¹⁶ Eric A. Powell, "Messengers to the Gods," *Archaeology* 67, no. 2 (March & April 2014): 52, accessed December 3, 2017.

<http://proxy-ship.klnpa.org/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=94360127&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

¹⁷ Paul T. Nicholson, Salima Ikram, and Steve Mills, "The Catacombs of Anubis at North Saqqara.," *Antiquity* 89, no. 345 (June 2015): 647, accessed December 3, 2017, doi:10.15184/aqy.2014.53.

¹⁸ Salima Ikram, "Man's best friend for eternity: dog and human burials in ancient Egypt," *Anthropozoologica* 48, no. 2 (2013): , accessed December 3, 2017, <http://proxy-ship.klnpa.org/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=bxh&AN=BACD201400122206&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

Paul T. Nicholson, Salima Ikram, and Steve Mills, "The Catacombs of Anubis at North Saqqara.," *Antiquity* 89, no. 345 (June 2015): 647, accessed December 3, 2017, doi:10.15184/aqy.2014.53.

linen wrappings. In fact, there are no highly decorated mummies that were found at the site, which contrasts with some other sites where votive mummies were found.¹⁹

The demand for mummies increased over time, so some species began to be raised in captivity. The Temple of Thoth was once believed to have “[sixty thousand] living ibises being readied for mummification,” with a total of approximately four million mummies being buried there.²⁰ There were many animals buried in all of the temples, meaning that most were votive and not sacred, as well as that they were not all raised within the temple walls. The puppies that were buried in the dog catacombs were likely bred off-site at nearby puppy farms. The number of animals in those catacombs totaled over seven million. They would likely be buried in mass annual or biannual ceremonies, meaning that the pilgrims would not see their individual animal being laid to rest. In the catacombs, the galleries would be filled and then a “poorly constructed wall of stone and mud would be built across the entrance.” The vast number of mummified animals proves that animals were a very important part of Ancient Egyptian religion.

It may seem like the great number of animals being raised for mummification would mean that all of the mummies would be real, but there are many cases in which fraudulent mummies existed. Some types of animals could not be raised in captivity, so those are the ones that were more likely to be fraudulent. For example, in the case of falcons, “[d]ummy mummies... were... created out of fancy bundles of rags and sold to unsuspecting pilgrims.”

¹⁹ Paul T. Nicholson, Salima Ikram, and Steve Mills, "The Catacombs of Anubis at North Saqqara.," *Antiquity* 89, no. 345 (June 2015): 655, accessed December 3, 2017, doi:10.15184/aqy.2014.53.

²⁰ Eric A. Powell, "Messengers to the Gods," *Archaeology* 67, no. 2 (March & April 2014): 50-51, accessed December 3, 2017.
<http://proxy-ship.klnpa.org/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=94360127&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

The wrappings were often embellished in attempt to make up for the fact that the mummies are fake.²¹ Up until the modern day there was no way to tell if the mummies were real or fake without tearing them apart, but technology such as radiography (x-rays) and computed tomography (CT or CAT scans) has allowed the interior of the mummies to be examined without damaging the specimen. The translation is not completely clear, but six priests were imprisoned in relation to corruption in the animal-mummification business, so a program was put in place to make sure the mummies were “buried all at once during an annual festival overseen by reliable officials.”²² Similarly, most of the dogs found in the catacombs were neonates, so it is possible that the pilgrims believed that they were getting one of the adult dogs that they saw at the Anubieion Temple, and ended up with a neonate instead. On the other hand, they could have purchased the neonate at a farm and brought it with them if that was an acceptable offering. This would be because “its life may have been extremely short but its journey to the afterlife was to be a good one and the afterlife was forever; the animal cults cannot be interpreted within a framework of twenty-first-century sensibilities.” Their strong belief in the afterlife for all creatures would have justified the means of killing an animal so young.²³ No matter the potential reason, fraudulent mummies did exist to trick pilgrims and save the temples and breeders money.

²¹Bob Brier, "Case of the Dummy Mummy.," *Archaeology* 54, no. 5 (Sept. & oct. 2001): accessed December 3, 2017.
<http://proxy-ship.klnpa.org/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=5096248&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

²²Eric A. Powell, "Messengers to the Gods," *Archaeology* 67, no. 2 (March & April 2014): 52, accessed December 3, 2017.
<http://proxy-ship.klnpa.org/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=94360127&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

²³Paul T. Nicholson, Salima Ikram, and Steve Mills, "The Catacombs of Anubis at North Saqqara.," *Antiquity* 89, no. 345 (June 2015): 655, accessed December 3, 2017, doi:10.15184/aqy.2014.53.

On the other hand, computed tomography, radiography and other various types of gas chromatography allow scientists and historians to see the great care that went into some of the mummies. The University of Manchester only removes samples from artifacts that are already damaged, so radiography and computed tomography are used to investigate the contents of other mummies. They developed a mummy protocol that allows them to quickly and effectively visualize the contents of the mummies, which they borrow from more than 56 museums through the BioBank project.²⁴ Stephen Buckley and his colleagues at the Bristol Biogeochemistry Research Centre used four types of gas chromatography to examine the contents of embalming that went into the mummies of a cat, ibis and hawk. They found that “n-alkyl and cyclic biomarker components characteristic of fats, oils, beeswax, sugar gum, petroleum bitumen, and coniferous, Pistacia and possibly cedar resins” were present, meaning that some animal mummies received the same amount of care as some human mummies.²⁵ The University of Manchester is recreating mummies using only beeswax and pine resin to examine the effectiveness of what they have studied, while the Bristol study contradicted the previous belief that “animals were merely wrapped in coarse linen bandages and/or dipped in ‘resin’ before death” since the gas chromatography revealed a much more complex process.²⁶

²⁴ Lidija M. McKnight, "Gifts for the Gods: Animal Mummies as Votive Offerings.," *Ancient Egypt Magazine* 16, no. 1 (Aug. & Sept. 2015): 31-32, accessed December 3, 2017, <http://proxy-ship.klnpa.org/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=hus&AN=109145995&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

²⁵ Stephen A. Buckley, Katherine A. Clark, and Richard P. Evershed, "Complex organic chemical balms of Pharaonic animal mummies.," *Nature* 431, no. 7006 (September 16, 2004): 294, accessed December 3, 2017, doi:10.1038/nature02849.

²⁶ Lidija M. McKnight, "Gifts for the Gods: Animal Mummies as Votive Offerings.," *Ancient Egypt Magazine* 16, no. 1 (Aug. & Sept. 2015): 32-33, accessed December 3, 2017, <http://proxy-ship.klnpa.org/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=hus&AN=109145995&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

The animal mummification business as a whole allows people of the modern day to understand the importance of animals in Ancient Egyptian religion. Technology such as radiography and computed tomography allow scientists to view the inside of the mummies without damaging them, which was not possible in the past. These allow a deeper understanding, while also allowing the original artifact to remain completely intact. Some animals were treated as if they were humans, while others turned out to not be animals at all, or at least not the right animal. These fraudulent mummies existed to trick naive pilgrims when they visited the temples and it saved the people who raised the animals a lot of money. Sometimes they existed because the particular animal was harder to raise in captivity, but no matter what the reason, the purpose was the same. It was a corrupt way to make some extra money. Some animals, such as ibises or dogs, were much easier to raise in captivity, so there was a higher chance that their mummies would be legit. The breeders raised animals in similar numbers to today's factory farming, so the business was very profitable. This replaced the previous way that Egyptians prayed to gods, which included leaving bronze statues at the temples. Mummies proved to be a cheaper alternative to the statues. The statues or mummies would be of the animal that represented that particular god. The god and animal could be connected by behavior, the location that it is associated with or any other connection that the Ancient Egyptians made up in their mind. Just like other societies at any period in time, Ancient Egyptians used animals for food and other purposes, but unlike other societies, animals had a very strong prevalence in Ancient Egyptian religion. This is because Egyptians believed that

Stephen A. Buckley, Katherine A. Clark, and Richard P. Evershed, "Complex organic chemical balms of Pharaonic animal mummies.," *Nature* 431, no. 7006 (September 16, 2004): 294, accessed December 3, 2017, doi:10.1038/nature02849.

animals had souls, which was a major difference between them and other societies at that time or in other time periods. While many people know that Ancient Egyptians had strong connections to animals, many people do not realize that the connection is religious and includes virtually every animal that lived alongside them throughout that time.