CHAPTER TWELVE

ANIMALS IN EGYPTIAN RELIGION

EMILY TEETER

Egyptian religion is highly charged with animal iconography. The role of animals in Egyptian religion is generally misunderstood and their significance overestimated, largely because of the misconceptions of Greeks and Romans who visited Egypt in antiquity. Herodotus (ca. 500 B.C.) correctly reported that animal worship involved “praying to the god to whom the particular creature, whichever it may be, is sacred” (II.65), hence that the Egyptians worshiped the god in his living image of the animal. Yet later Classical authors, such as Diodorus (first century B.C.) wrote that “the Egyptians are fanatically addicted to the worship of certain animals, the dead as well as the living” (Diodorus I.83) intimating that it was the animal itself rather than the deity that was the focus of the cult. Lucians’ famous dialogue of the second century A.D. contained this disdainful passage:

But you, you dog-faced Egyptian, dressed up in linen, who do you think you are my friend? How do you expect to pass for a god, when you howl as you do? ... I am ashamed to mention the ibis and the apes, or the goats and the other far more ridiculous creatures from Egypt who you have crammed into heaven, goodness knows how. How, gods can you tolerate seeing them worshiped on equal terms with yourselves or even honored above you?1

Consider also the judgment attributed to the Persian king Cambyses: “Do you call that [the Apis bull] a god, you blockheads? Are your gods flesh and blood? ... No doubt a god like that is good enough for the Egyptians; but you won’t get away with trying to make a fool of me” (Herodotus II.29).

DIVINE REPRESENTATIONS

The foreign misconceptions, bewilderment, and even contempt for animal gods was fueled by representations that were completely unfamiliar (Smelik and Hémelrijk 1984). Not only were the gods shown in what was considered to be base zoomorphic representations, but still stranger and more barbaric were the mixed forms (therianthropic). The fact that a single god could be represented in several different ways only did more to convince people of other cultural backgrounds that the Egyptians were either overly mystical or simply gullible.

Indeed, one of the most fascinating features of animals in Egyptian religion is their use of representations of the gods and the variability in those representations. A single deity might be represented zoomorphically, therianthropically, and anthropomorphically and conversely, a particular animal could represent a variety of deities (Table 12.1).

Nearly every species of animal in Egypt was at some point associated with a deity, notable exceptions being the horse and the hedgehog. Identifying which god is being represented is not always simple, since Anubis, Wepwawet and Duamutef are all shown as a jackal, a cow may be the goddess Hathor or Mehetweret, and a falcon-headed god can represent a tremendous range of gods (Re, Re-Horakhty, Horus, Horus-Son-of-Isis) whose identity cannot usually be determined without an accompanying caption (see Table 12.1).

The mixed forms, perhaps the most characteristic and distinctive feature of Egyptian iconography, usually placed an animal head on a fully human body (fig. 12.1). The junction of animal and human elements was delineated and defined by a broad beaded collar. In rarer cases dating from the New Kingdom onward, the god’s head could be replaced by an entire animal, such as the scarab beetle, which emerges from the shoulders of the god Khepri. In other cases (Selket and Hatmehyet) the animal emblem of the deity (a scorpion and fish, respectively) could simply rest upon, or be attached to the fully anthropomorphic head. More rarely, a human head was placed on an animal body, the best example being the androsphinx, which in the royal context symbolized the king in his leonine aspect.

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2 For example the god Horus could be shown as a man often with the royal crown, as a falcon-headed man or as a falcon.