

Anthropomorphism and the relationship between humans and animals in Ancient Egypt

Anthropomorphism is defined as “the attribution of human characteristics, emotions, and behaviours to animals or other non-human things (including objects, plants, and supernatural beings). Some famous examples of anthropomorphism include Winnie the Pooh, the Little Engine that Could, and Simba from the movie *Lion King*.” Anthropomorphism differs to the use of personification the qualities assigned to non-human things by personification are figurative, not something they actually possess; with anthropomorphism, human attributes can be found on the non-human being already, such as talking, walking on two legs, etc.¹ There has always been a relationship between humans and animals, since the first domestication of animals; in Ancient Egypt, animals were at the heart of everyday life and religion, with the believed sacred beliefs surrounding animals being seen in the use of anthropomorphic representations of Gods and the cult worship of them.

People in Ancient Egypt perceived and interacted with religion and the Gods through the real and natural world, different animals that would be seen in the environment of Ancient Egypt were viewed as manifestations of the Gods because of the anthropomorphic characteristics they had which could be seen in the Gods. An American scholar theorised that this was because of the unchanging nature of animals and their appearance, and how compared to the generational changes in human appearance against the unchanging one of animals this was seen as a representation of the Gods². ‘Temple animals’ were those that were seen as manifestations of the God themselves were housed within or close to temples dedicated to specific Gods, such as baboons being housed in temples to worship in the name of the God Thoth. Animals of the same species who were not believed to be sacred enough to be considered as manifestations of the God were still viewed as being sacred to that God, as they could appear in any guise. This can be seen in the archaeological evidence found at Saqqara, of the thousands of preserved, mummified bodies of cats thought to have been placed there as offerings or honourings to the Goddess Bast. Animals, particularly cats, were kept in the homes of Egyptian people to serve as representations of the Gods within the home, so the powers of the God could protect the house. Bast the cat Goddess was thought to be the Goddess of protection, fertility and pregnancy (among other smaller ones), having a cat in the home was thought to be a way of ensuring success and protection in these areas of life. Shrines were also erected in the homes to the Gods so that worship could be conducted without the need to travel to the temple of a specific God.

Religion in Ancient Egypt was a complex polytheist system of rituals and different beliefs; there was change to the religion throughout the course of the Ancient Egyptian era, with the hierarchy and powers of Gods changed, with worship varying in degree between areas and periods. For example, the God Amun was the primary worshipped God during the reign of Amenhotep III, with Thebes being the primary area of worship being as it was the capital city; during the reign of Akhenaten, Amehotep’s successor, the capital of Egypt was changed to the newly erected city of Amarna to worship the God Aten under a monotheistic system, which was reverted upon the succession of Tutankhamun.

¹ Frisella. E, 2017, LitCharts, “Anthropomorphism”, available at: <https://www.litcharts.com/literary-devices-and-terms/anthropomorphism> [Accessed: 28/04/2021]

² 2021, Encyclopaedia.com, “Animals in Egyptian Religion”, available at: <https://www.encyclopedia.com/humanities/culture-magazines/animals-egyptian-religion> [Accessed: 27/04/2021]

The belief in the manifestation of Gods through animals was prevalent in Egypt and many animals were seen as representations of the Gods among them, animals which were natural to the environment of Ancient Egypt and the import and trade system of the eras.

Jackals were viewed as manifestations of the God Anubis, God of Mummification and the Afterlife. Archaeological evidence of statues and honourings to Anubis depict him as bearing the head of a jackal on the body of a man. Jackals were associated with death because of their scavenger nature and served as a representation of the funerary God.

Another animal which would have been imported into Egypt and seen as embodying a God was the lion. The Goddess Sekhmet was the Goddess of healing and a warrior, thought as the protector of the Pharaoh, who was also seen as an embodiment of the Gods. Lions symbolised power and kingship, with there being some ideas that Pharaohs would keep lions as pets; they also represent courage and strength, which was needed by the Goddess who served as a protector and warrior.

Nile Crocodiles were seen as the manifestation of the Sobek, the Lord of Crocodiles and a God of the Nile River. There has been evidence found that there were temples dedicated to Sobek which housed crocodiles within them and people would travel to worship the God.

The Nile river was the heartline of Ancient Egypt, as it ran through the entirety of the country providing a trade and travel route, and it's annual flooding was the pinnacle of the harvest season to replenish the quality of the soil. Worship of Sobek was important to the everyday life of Ancient Egyptians, to ensure the 'happiness' of the Nile God so that the Nile would perform as needed. This ideology is an example of how the Ancient Egyptians would use the natural world and religion to understand the world surrounding them, in an era pre-modern science and understanding. The flooding of the Nile river and the harvest cycle was thought to be based upon the will and power of the Gods, so when the river did not flood it was believed that the God was not pleased and offerings would then be made in appeasement; the modern era understands the reasons for why the river may not flood, but the Egyptians used religion and anthropomorphism of crocodiles to make up for what they did not understand.

Among the most important of the domesticated animals found in Ancient Egypt was cattle, they provided food and milk which would be able to sustain a family and were able to contribute to the work. Many different Gods were seen to be manifested in the form of cattle, such as the Goddess Hathor. Among one of the most popular Gods of Ancient Egypt, Hathor was seen as the Goddess of love, pleasure, fertility and beauty. Religion of Hathor was mainly done by women (though men did participate), with temples dedicated to her having dedicated Priestesses within to cater to the Gods needs and worship. The Apis Bull of Egyptian Capital city of Memphis was a manifestation of the God Ptah, the God of Craftsmen and Architects. The bull symbolized strength and was linked closely with kingship, possibly explaining why the bull was worshipped so heavily in the capital city.

The powers of Gods were needed in everyday life, and the view that animals served as manifestations provided the Ancient Egyptians with a method in which they could worship the Gods through those animals. The qualities believed to be symbolized by the animals representing the Gods were attributed to them to help the powers believed to be possessed by the specific Gods.

Archaeological evidence has been found in different locations, predominantly in the ruins of Saqqara, of animal mummification. Mummification is a practice which can be seen heavily in archaeological evidence, with the most famous examples being of the Pharaohs discovered in places such as the Valley of the Kings and the smaller Valley of the Queens not far away.

Mummification is a process of preserving the body so that it does not decay in the heat and dryness of the Egyptian deserts. For humans, the process is predominantly seen in the upper classes of the civilisation, but animal mummification is thought to have been done by all classes, as they brought animals to be offerings to the Gods. Some tombs containing animal mummies have contained millions of mummified corpses of varied animals. Different reasonings for why animals would have been mummified in Ancient Egypt are thought to be that they were offerings to Gods thought to be manifested by that animal. It was thought it would appease the God and bring their protection upon that person should they bring a mummified offering of their manifestation to their temple. Another idea is that the mummified animals were honoured pets of a family which had passed and been mummified; cats are often found mummified, leading to the belief that pets were mummified upon their death. Animals would also be preserved to serve as food for humans passing onto the afterlife, as the belief in Ancient Egyptian religion was that the soul lives on in the afterlife as they did in death, leading to the need for food and other resources, excavations of tombs have discovered bowls, tools and clothes.

The oldest evidence of animal mummification can be found during the Predynastic period before the unification of Upper and Lower Egypt. The most evidence has been found at Saqqara, with tombs containing thousands of mummified animals being discovered. Animals such as cats, dogs, crocodiles, monkeys and ibises have been discovered, with some rare finds including the mummified bodies of lion cubs, are among those at Saqqara. Saqqara is the necropolis of Memphis containing numerous pyramids and discovered caches of tombs, both human and animal. In use from the Third Dynasty (2670.BC-2650.BC), during the Old Kingdom (2700.BC-2200.BC) of Ancient Egypt.

Investigations done into the discovered animal mummies, conducted by Richard Evershed from the University of Bristol, has found that the supplies that were used in human mummification were also used on those of animals, such as beeswax, fine linens and cedar resins. This is contrary to the former idea that animal mummies were not given as much thought and preparation as in human mummification. Mummification itself was a long and expensive process to complete to a good standard, the fact that such a high number of animal mummies have been discovered and in a well preserved state, shows that the Egyptians valued the animals and the purpose their mummification was for.

The religious worship seen in Ancient Egypt are cult like in practice; temples would be erected to specific Gods and Goddesses, with Priests or Priestesses living within, serving the Gods and performing rituals. Religion was a dominant force in the everyday life of Egyptians, with the Priests and other Godly people being second in the hierarchy to the royalty, as can be seen in many different periods of history and geographical areas. Gods would be worshipped differently throughout different areas of Egypt, with different cities having different principal Gods, which were subject to change depending on the social and political sidings of the city and the period of time it takes place. Animal mummification is one of the somewhat cult-like ways of the religion; an excavation conducted in Thebes uncovered the mummified remains of a bull, the lining wrapping on the bull had the markings of ears, horns and other facial features mimicking the face of a bull; a triangular drawing on the centre of the bull's forehead was intended to symbolise the Apis bull. After an examination was performed of the mummified bull, it was revealed that the bulls mummified within were between the ages of six to twelve months, meaning they were reared and killed for religious reasons. Another example of this can be seen in the examinations of cats found

mummified at Saqqara have shown that a large number were between the ages of either two to six months or nine to twelve months.

In one Ancient Egyptian myth, the sun God Ra was said to be the of the origin of life, a similar story to that of the Christian creation story. The first appearance of the sun on a morning was represented by a scarab beetle; the setting sun was thought to be caused by Atum, the Creator God seen in the cosmogonic myths of Ancient Egypt. The connection between the daily rising and setting of the sun was linked to rebirth. The scarab beetle can be seen throughout the Ancient Egyptian civilisation, symbolising the God Re. It can be seen and found on discovered artifacts such as pendants, in some tomb writings, in burial chambers, on sarcophagus, due to their relation with rebirth and connection to Ra. The Scarab served as a personal or administrative seal, possibly such as those of the Pharaohs advisors or courtiers.

Throughout the timeline of Ancient Egyptian civilisation there was a strong relationship between the people and the environment, with first being a hunting and gathering society and then progressing onto becoming an agricultural society. Animals were first perceived as prey source before becoming a source of work and other resources such as milk, after the progression of the domestication of animals. This is evidence of the progressive developments of the human and animal relationship and the change of society over periods of time. There was an inevitability that animals would progress to play a large part of Ancient Egyptian society, with Egyptians wanting to incorporate divine power and other powerful traits which they believed the animals possessed and how they aligned with the Gods they worshipped. Each different animal possessed a different divine power and offered a different purpose and offering, which is why there was such a large amount of animal sacrifice and pet mummification. Apis bulls were originally hunted before later being domesticated for breeding, food and work; these bulls can sometimes be seen shown on sandstone stelae, on the walls of religious temples and also alongside the mummified bodies left within temples and burial chambers.

The relationship between humans and animals is a complex one which has been developed and changed through the change of human culture and domestication. In Ancient Egypt there was a sacredness put onto animals which saw them as the manifestation of the polytheistic religious system which the Egyptians followed and was a part of everyday life. Animals were shown as representations of the Gods with artifacts, monuments and temple statues showing the Gods as hybrid forms of humans and animals, with Anubis being seen represented in the form of a man bearing the head of a jackal; some Gods possessed the likeness of multiple different animals, such as Tawaret, who is represented in the form of a bipedal female hippopotamus, with human female breasts, and the limbs and paws of a lion. There was a respect and honour that was afforded to the animals in Ancient Egypt because of the belief that Gods could take the form of different animals which were their manifestation; the evidence found of animal mummification such as that at Saqqara shows that the practice of taking animals to the afterlife, for a different reasons such as religious offerings to food sources to human souls in the afterlife and to transfer power of animals to the mummified body. Mummification as a practice was an expensive one in ancient Egypt, with normal Egyptian people not being mummified, only those with money were able to be mummified; however the amount of discovered evidence of the mummification of animals shows that the expense was accepted when it came to the offerings and mummification of animals. Millions of mummified remains of cats have been discovered in caches at Saqqara

as well as dogs, Ibises, and different species of monkey such as baboons, some evidence of mummified crocodiles have been found around Egypt, thought to be linked to the God Sobek and the river Nile. The relationship between humans and animals can be seen in the religious practices of Ancient Egypt and the anthropomorphism seen within it shows evidence of how the use of religion was aided by and used the natural world of the Ancient Egyptian era, how the attributes shared between animals, humans and the Gods would influence the manifestations of Gods and the powers they would possess. The variation in animals used as manifestations of the Gods shows that the Ancient Egyptians understood the different characteristics possessed by the animals they witnessed and how those aligned with the powers and properties that it was believed the Gods possessed. The characteristics desirable, such as that of courageousness being symbolised by lions and that being linked to the Pharaoh was a way of trying to imitate the same characteristic within the Pharaoh.