

## Sun Worshippers of Ancient Egypt



PHOTO: W1278 A cosmetic vessel(?) in the shape of a squatting baboon holding a vessel (Egypt Centre Abaset)

Baboons can be seen in imagery from as early as the Predynastic Period and played a significant role in ancient Egyptian religion and cosmology.

Why the Egyptians considered baboons to be sacred is straightforward. When baboons wake in the morning, like many primates (humans included), they tend to stretch and produce vocalisations. To some, the pose baboons adopt while stretching – sometimes raising their front legs in the air – resembles worship. As they stretch more often at

sunrise, this action together with their 'chattering' noises when moving from sleeping sites, was interpreted as singing and dancing to praise the Sun-God, Ra.<sup>1</sup>

The role of the baboons was sacred. As for several gods to whom they are sacred, the deity who links baboons clearly with language is Thoth. Thoth is often depicted as a baboon scribe who not only spoke and wrote, but who gave the gift of language to the Egyptians, rather than simply understanding it.<sup>2</sup>

As mentioned above, the baboon is probably most well-known as a manifestation of the god Thoth. Thoth took on the position as 'God of the scribes', being associated with various subjects such as writing, science, judgement, knowledge, and the afterlife.<sup>3</sup> The ancient Egyptians probably recognised the human-like characteristics of the baboon, its intelligence and communication skills, and deemed it a suitable embodiment of this god.<sup>4</sup> Thoth acted as a kind of mediator between the people and the gods.

In iconography, baboon Thoth can often be seen in a squatting position with his hands on his knees and with a crescent moon or lunar disc on top of his head. In scenes from the Book of the Dead, baboons are depicted guarding the 'Lake of Fire' whereby the dead could be redeemed, and sometimes, Thoth can be seen in his baboon form sitting on top of the judgement scales during the weighing of the heart, recording the decision. Moreover, Thoth could assist the dead in their passage to the hereafter.<sup>5</sup>

The baboon was also employed as a manifestation of the god Hapy, one of the Four Sons of Horus whose heads formed the lids of the canopic jars. The long-nosed, baboon-headed Hapy was intended to protect the mummified lungs for them to be restored to the deceased in the afterlife, and therefore be reborn. The lungs, liver, intestines, and stomach were preserved during mummification and in the New Kingdom, these were placed into four canopic jars with the heads of the Four Sons of Horus (baboon, human, falcon, and jackal). As time went on, the mummified organs would be placed back inside

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<sup>1</sup> G. Pinch: *Egyptian Mythology: A guide to Gods, Goddesses, and tradition of Ancient Egypt*. (2004) Oxford: Oxford university press.

<sup>2</sup> Hans Kummer: *In Quest of the Sacred Baboon*. (1995), Chichester: Princeton University Press

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.readingmuseum.org.uk/blog/sacred-animals-ancient-egypt>. {Accessed 5<sup>th</sup> March 2024}

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.readingmuseum.org.uk/blog/sacred-animals-ancient-egypt>. {Accessed 5<sup>th</sup> March 2024}

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.readingmuseum.org.uk/blog/sacred-animals-ancient-egypt>. {Accessed 5<sup>th</sup> March 2024}

the body. Sometimes 'dummy jars' formed part of the burial equipment instead, so that the deceased could still receive the protection of the Four Sons of Horus.

During the New Kingdom (c. 1550-1069 BC), monkeys were generally imported from south of Egypt (from Nubia and Punt), to be used in temples. They probably experienced a limited life expectancy due to their poor living conditions in the harsh desert environment, including insufficient food intake and a lack of movement and light. In later periods, sacred temple baboons were kept for ritual functions, mummified by the thousands, and buried in coffins.<sup>6</sup>

The Baboon Catacomb at North Saqqara occupies two levels, the Upper Galleries (+400-200 BC) with 200 and the Lower Gallery (+200-30 BC) with 237 niches. Fewer baboons are buried in the lower Gallery compared with the Upper Gallery. Baboons were mummified in a squatting position and were placed inside rectangular wooden shrines.<sup>7</sup> Into these shrines, gypsum plaster was poured, and the mummy was encased in a block, and sealed with limestone slabs, inscribed with a short biography of the animal including the name, place of birth, date of death and prayers.<sup>8</sup>

Regards from the Baboons of Ancient Egypt !

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.readingmuseum.org.uk/blog/sacred-animals-ancient-egypt>. {Accessed 5th March 2024}

<sup>7</sup> S. Ikram: *Devine creatures: Animal mummies in Ancient Egypt*. (2005), Cairo: American University in Cairo press. P.69

<sup>8</sup>Ikram: *Devine creatures: Animal mummies in Ancient Egypt*. (2005), Cairo: American University in Cairo press. P.69