

## A FEW REMARKS UPON THE RELIGIOUS SIGNIFICANCE OF ANIMALS IN ANCIENT EGYPT\*

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For a fair insight into religion and culture in ancient Egypt, the place these accorded to animals can hardly be overestimated. Generally speaking, the animal has a larger place in many a so-called primitive or archaic culture than in the modern western culture. Yet the large part of animals in the ancient Egyptian culture and religion is very striking, and is already evident, for instance, in the hieroglyphic script. No fewer than 176 of the 777 hieroglyphs in Gardiner's *Signlist* refer to the animal kingdom, mammals, parts of mammals, birds, parts of birds, amphibious animals, reptiles, fishes and parts of fishes, invertebrata and lesser animals, that is to say that 1 out of every 4 or 5 hieroglyphs has to do with animals. Nowhere in the world have animals been drawn, painted or otherwise represented so frequently and in such variety as in Egyptian art. After so many centuries, we are still often struck by Egyptian depictions of animals for Egyptian art, being expressive of Egyptian culture, was directed upon typical traits<sup>1</sup> and could acutely define an animals characteristics.

Yet non-Egyptians cannot always enter into the way the ancient Egyptians conceived of animals and appreciate their ability to express this view in the visual arts. That the Egyptians could represent their gods as humans with animal heads was already a matter of bewilderment and derision to the Greeks. The problem lies mainly in the religious significance attached to the animal world by the Egyptians.

Every culture has traits with an immediate appeal, but also elements that are less easily comprehended, and the latter will often prove to be the religious ones. He who takes the stand that religion is really nonsense in the modern world, will easily come to suppose that religion had little meaning in ancient Egypt. According to an oral tradition, this was once expressed by Erman at the end of a lec-

ture on Egyptian religion in the following words: "Aber Quatsch ist es doch, meine Herren!"

On the other hand, if one holds that religion in the modern world is something other than could originate in the heart of man, or however one wants to put it, then one can just as easily bear with it that religion in Egypt contains a good many paradoxes and nonsensicalities that an ordinary person cannot grasp and that the faith of the believers, to use a term of Kristensen, cannot be rationally explained but must be described with religious intuition, which means subjectively. It would seem best to regard Egyptian religion as a constituent part of Egyptian culture, that like other parts has a meaning and is explicable, even if we do not always succeed in giving tenable and satisfactory explanations. Human beings, the ancient Egyptians included, are not always so easy to enter into and to fathom.

In the Egyptian world view man did not occupy such a dominant position over against the animal world as we have adopted almost as a matter of course following from the Judaeo-Christian or humanistic tradition. Hornung<sup>2</sup> even pithily formulated that man was not accounted lord of the animals, but partner of the animals. Animals were seen as living beings, as were men and indeed gods also. In the *Shabaka text*<sup>3</sup> we read that the creative forces of the heart and tongue of Ptah are active "in all gods, all people, all cattle, all crawling creatures, (in short) in all that lives".

Kees<sup>4</sup> has written: "Nach ägyptischem Glauben sind Götter und Menschen wie die ganze belebte Natur aus derselben göttlichen Urkraft hervorgegangen". It has often been noted in handbooks on Egyptian religion, that in Egyptian myths of creation so little attention is given to the creation of mankind. One of the few data on man's creation is the so frequently reproduced depiction of the god Khnum forming man on his potter's wheel. It is less well known that the god Khnum was equally regarded as the creator of the animal world.<sup>5</sup> Animals, like mankind, have their share in providential maintenance by the creator god, as appears from an Amon hymn:<sup>6</sup>

"Thou art the only one, the creator of all that is. From whose eye men came forth. From whose mouth the gods originated. Who creates the herbs which the cattle live on. And the corn for the

people. Who creates that which the fish in the river life on. And the birds in the air. Who gives breath to the chicken in the egg. Who maintains the young of the snake. Who creates the nourishment of the gnat. And also of the worms and the fleas. Who cares for the mice in their hole and keeps alive the insects in every tree.”

Thus we can come to understand the phenomenon which at first may well seem rather strange to a westerner, that in Egyptian ethics giving food to the hungry and clothing to the naked can be mentioned in the same breath with the feeding of animals. In a text of the first millennium B.C., when the mummifying of animals was already much in vogue, one could read: “I have given bread to the hungry, water to the thirsty, clothing to the naked. I have given food to the ibis, the falcon, the cat and the jackal”.<sup>7</sup> Also, though, in a tomb of the third millennium B.C. in *Deir el Gabrawi* we may read “I have given bread to the hungry in the nome of the Snake mountain. I have clothed who was naked there. I have made its banks full with cattle and its low-lying lands with sheep and goats. I have satiated the jackals of the mountain and the birds of prey of the heavens with the flesh of sheep and goats”.<sup>8</sup>

The glory of the creator god must not only be proclaimed to men, but also to the animals: “Tell it to son and daughter, to great and small. Tell it from generation to generation not yet born. Tell it to the fish in the river and the birds in the sky”.<sup>9</sup> In various Egyptian hymns, and not only in the famous sun hymn of Akhenaten, we find that men and animals adore the creator god: Quadrupeds skip, birds worship with their wings, fishes leap in the river. All that breathes and lives praises the creator god.

Representatives of the animal world, such as ducks or cattle, may function beside people as accusers of a deceased pharaoh.<sup>10</sup> At the judgement of the dead the deceased must avow not to have maltreated any cattle (= animals).<sup>11</sup> We leave aside the fact that, according to the authors of the Book of the Dead, humans did not disdain to appear in bird shape after their death, for going into this matter more deeply would lead us too far. In any case there is no idea of reincarnation here.

In modern times religion, when not a ground for ethical and political action, seems to be reduced to a personal relation between god and man. In Egypt religion was just as much a system for

explaining the world and a system of communication capable of extension to embrace everything existing and alive. This relation between man and the cosmos, which indeed is not only found in Egypt but in many non-modern religions,<sup>12</sup> can afford an explanation of the fact that the Egyptians depicted their gods not only in human form but also in animal form. This does not mean though that these gods in animal shape were merely animals. Just as the Egyptians did not mean to worship images or human beings in their religion, so also they did not mean to worship animals, but gods.

How specific animals came to be associated with specific gods can usually not be determined historically for lack of sufficient data. The opinion still so often ventilated that in predynastic Egypt animals or animal gods were worshipped and that at the beginning of historical times a so-called humanization of the powers took place, so that the worship of gods in animal form is to be regarded as a survival from prehistoric times is still an unproven hypothesis and likely to remain so. That the Egyptians represented their gods not only as an animal or a human being, but sometimes as a hybrid consisting of a human body with the head of an animal or a bird is far from being a humanization of powers that was arrested halfway. In prehistoric and predynastic Egypt both animals and human beings were depicted, but whether we have to do here with images of divinities is uncertain and even improbable. Not until the beginning of historical times can we be sure that certain animal figures, human figures or hybrids of the two represented gods. A historical development in the sense that divine images in animal form were older than images in hybrid or in human form cannot be demonstrated.<sup>13</sup>

Since in ancient Egypt there was not yet such an exclusive interest in the specifically human as we see in later forms of religion and world view, and because there the difference between man and animal was not so absolute but regarded as relative, since men and animals both together are living beings, gods could be represented as humans, as animals and in composite human-animal form. In this direction can one seek an explanation. Explaining is something else again than understanding or being sensible of the feeling expressed. Once one has explained how it comes about that people

worship gods in animal form, we can if we like try to apply the subjective technique of understanding, however great the danger that we will come up against humanistic resistances to connecting the divine with the animal. A well-known quotation from the *Paedagogus* of *Clemens Alexandrinus*<sup>14</sup> makes this plainer than an abstract disquisition: “The temples sparkle with gold, silver and mat gold and flash with coloured stones from India and Ethiopia. The sanctuaries are overshadowed by cloths studded with gold. If, however, you enter the interior of the enclosure, hastening towards the sight of the almighty and look for the statue residing in the temple and if a *pastophoros* or another celebrant, after having solemnly looked round the sanctuary, singing a song in the language of the Egyptians draws back the curtain a little to show the god, he will make us laugh about the object of worship. For we shall not find the god for whom we have been looking inside, the god towards whom we have hastened, but a cat or a crocodile, or a native snake or a similar animal, which should not be in a temple, but in a cleft or a den or on a dung heap. The god of the Egyptians appears on a purple couch as a wallowing animal”.

It follows from the above that Frankfort's<sup>15</sup> well-known view that in Egypt animals in themselves had a religious significance because they are different from men goes too far, since precisely this “otherness” of animals was not regarded as so absolute. We must note here that this view is not so much based on Egyptian texts, but seems to be derived from the then prevailing religio-philosophical theory of Rudolf Otto, which we may by now call outdated, positing the religious or the numinous as the *ganz Andere*. That which remains valid for certain forms of Islam, Judaism and Christianity need not be applicable to all religions. Van Baaren has remarked: “Rudolf Otto, while theorizing about the Holy as the *ganz Andere* has made the rare exceptions the general norm and has thus greatly impeded our understanding of religion as it actually is”.<sup>16</sup>

Because the Egyptians regarded animals as bearers of life they drew certain consequences. Not solely in the sense of what we usually mean by reverence for life.<sup>17</sup> Under certain circumstances they seem deliberately to have let a living animal die, e.g. to have let a cat drown so that it could be mummified and become an Osiris

and thus an intermediary between men and gods, able to transmit prayers. This then is not killing life to destroy it, but to let it arise from death.<sup>18</sup>

Already in prehistoric times<sup>19</sup> animals were sometimes ritually buried: predynastic graves have been found of gazelles that were wrapped in mats and provided with funerary gifts such as pots of food and drink, as if it concerned a life that must be preserved. Scattered data from the Old Kingdom to the New Kingdom show that by means of ceremonies and mummification it was attempted to preserve the life of animals that people had become especially attached to, such as a dog, a cat, a monkey, a gazelle, a horse. Horses wrapped in linen that were found near Deir el Bahari and elsewhere<sup>20</sup> deserve special mention, for the horse came into Egypt at too late a date for it to become the sacred animal of a god. This means that animals were not only mummified as epiphanies of a particular god, but because they are bearers of life as humans are.

Especially in the course of the last millennium B.C. the mummifying of animals, which had been more or less sporadic in earlier times, assumed enormous proportions. If mummification of animals aims at preserving life, then the fact that it was not considered sufficient to mummyify simply one of a particular kind as the sacred animal of a god, but that people went on to mummify a tremendous number of individuals of various kinds, need not necessarily be written down a paradoxical symptom of decay beyond our comprehension, as some have done. Naturally we must guard against interpreting this mummification of animals which ran into astronomical figures, purely as disinterested reverence for life. As remarked above,<sup>21</sup> an animal mummy could be regarded as an Osiris. Like the many bronze statuettes of gods that are also from the Late Period, they could be deposited in the appropriate place as a votive offering and an intermediary by people occupied with their needs, desires and interests.

A great deal more could be said about the religious significance of animals in Egypt. Animals were also hunted, killed and sacrificed.<sup>22</sup> Hunting and killing, like sacrifice, could also be a religious act in which the role of a force of chaos and an enemy was assigned to the animal, which must be hunted down and even destroyed that the world order may stand. But this negative role

was not only reserved for animals. Human beings, too, had to be destroyed if they proved to be enemies of the pharaoh.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. A. de Buck, *Het typische en het individuele bij de Egyptenaren*, Leiden 1929.

<sup>2</sup> E. Hornung, Die Bedeutung des Tieres in alten Ägypten, *Studium Generale* 20 (1967), 69-84, esp. p. 72: "Herr" der Tiere kann nur ein Gott sein.

<sup>3</sup> H. Junker, Die Götterlehre von Memphis, *Abh. preuss. Akad. d. W.*, Jhrg. 1939, Philos.-hist. kl. nr. 23, Berlin 1940, 48.

<sup>4</sup> H. Kees, *Der Götterglaube im alten Ägypten*, Berlin 1956<sup>2</sup>, 3f. See p. 4-82: "Tierkulte".

<sup>5</sup> S. Sauneron, Khnoum de Chashotep, createur des animaux, *BIFAO* 62 (1964), 33-37.

<sup>6</sup> Pap. Bulaq 17. Translation with reference to parallels: J. Assmann, *Ägyptische Hymnen und Gebete*, Zürich-München 1975, 203.

<sup>7</sup> E. von Bergmann, *Hieroglyphische Inschriften*, Wien 1879, Pl. VI 9-10.

<sup>8</sup> K. Sethe, *Urkunden des Alten Reiches*, Leipzig 1933, 77.

<sup>9</sup> See H. Brunner, Verkündigung an Tiere. In: *Fragen an die Altägyptische Literatur*. Studien zum Gedenken an E. Otto, Wiesbaden 1977, 119-125.

<sup>10</sup> K. Sethe, *Die Altägyptischen Pyramidentexte*, Leipzig 1908, 386b.

<sup>11</sup> Book of the Dead. Spell 125.

<sup>12</sup> Th. P. van Baaren, *Menschen wie Wir*. Religion und Kult der schriftlosen Völker, Gütersloh 1964, 82-103.

<sup>13</sup> See now for this paragraph: R. Merz, *Die numinose Mischgestalt*, Methodenkritische Untersuchungen zu tiermenschlichen Erscheinungen Altägyptens, der Eiszeit und der Aranda in Australien, Berlin-New York 1978.

<sup>14</sup> Translation is from K. A. D. Smelik, The Cult of the Ibis in the Graeco-Roman Period. In: *Studies in Hellenistic Religions* (ed. M. J. Vermaseren), Leiden 1979, 225f.

<sup>15</sup> H. Frankfort, *Ancient Egyptian Religion* 1948, Harper Paperback New York 1961, 8ff.

<sup>16</sup> Th. P. van Baaren. In: *Religion, Culture and Methodology* (ed. Th. P. van Baaren and H. J. W. Drijvers), The Hague 1973, 40.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. H. Brunner, Albert Schweitzers universelle Ethik und die älteste Hochkultur der Menschheit. In: *Albert Schweitzer. Sein Denken und sein Weg* (Hrgg. v. H. W. Bähr), Tübingen 1962, 58-65.

<sup>18</sup> J. M. A. Janssen, Opmerkingen over de dierverering in het Oude Egypte, *Annalen van het Thijmgenootschap* 37 (1949), 275-297 esp. 295f. and J. Capart, Chats sacrés, *Chronique d'Égypte* 17 (1943), 35-37.

<sup>19</sup> H. Behrens, Neolithisch-frühmetallzeitliche Tierskelettfunde aus dem Nilgebiet und ihre religionsgeschichtliche Deutung, *Zeitschr. Äg. Spr.* 88 (1963), 75-83.

<sup>20</sup> J. Boesneck, Ein altägyptisches Pferdeskelett, *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts in Kairo* 26 (1970), 43-47.

<sup>21</sup> See note 18 and also Hornung, *o.c.* 72, and S. Morenz, Ein neues Dokument der Tierbestattung, *Zeitschr. Äg. Spr.* 88 (1962), 42-47.

<sup>22</sup> Hornung, *o.c.* 79-82.