

# Animals in Mythology

-- by Leonie Pullinger

In a fit to transform ideas into images or images into words or stories, I have often referred to my much-loved copy of the New Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology in which there are accounts of all kinds of animals, ordinary and otherwise.

Strolling through the galleries of museums in Egypt one might be struck by the multitude of divinities who attract attention on all sides. Colossal sandstone statues, granite and basalt, minute statues in glazed composition, bronze, some in gold, portray gods and goddesses frozen in hierarchical attitudes, seated or standing. Sometimes these male and female figures have heads with human features. Often they are surmounted by the muzzle of an animal or the beak of a bird. The same divinities, receiving adoration and offerings or performing ritual gestures for the benefit of their worshippers, can be seen again on the bas-reliefs of massive sarcophagi or sculptured on funerary stelae and stone blocks stripped from temple walls. They appear on mummy cases in the pictures which illuminate the papyri of the Book of the Dead.

In view of such a multiplicity of divine images, it may seem strange to suggest that the religion of ancient Egypt is very imperfectly known to us. The innumerable religion's texts which have survived often allude to mythological occurrences. The full stories, however, are almost never set down. They were known to every early Egyptian and handed down from one generation to another by word of mouth. Only the myth of Osiris, one of the greatest gods in the Egyptian pantheon has been transmitted in detail to us by Plutarch.

It seems that the earliest representations of Egyptian deities appeared in the middle of the fourth millennium, long before the first hieroglyphs. In those days, the inhabitants of the Nile valley lived in tribes. Each tribe had its own god who



was incarnated in the form either of an animal, a bird or a simple fetic. There is a fragment of a palette for grinding malachite in the Louvre on which we see men of one of these early tribes setting forth to hunt. They are bearded, unlike the clean-shaven men of later historical epochs and they wear only a belted loin cloth. At the back of the belt is attached the bushy tail of an animal. At their head marches their Chief.

In one hand he brandishes a club, in the other he grasps the staff of a standard or totem pole which bears a type of perch for a falcon. On other objects of the same class the hawk is replaced by an ibis, a jackal, a scorpion or perhaps by a thunderbolt, a bucranium or two crossed arrows on a shield. These are the gods of the tribe who led their followers into battle and when necessary, fought for them. Often, indeed, one of the divine animal's paw is a human hand which grasps a weapon to slaughter the enemy

or an implement to attach his fortress. These animal deities, however, gradually gave way to gods in human form and at the end of this anthropomorphic evolution, nothing of the primitive animal is left except the head surmounting the body of a man or woman. Sometimes the head too has become human and all that remains are vestigial ears or horns.

From the second dynasty on, the divine types seem to have become definitely fixed and remain unchanged until the end of paganism. Gods and goddesses alike often retain the head of the animal from which they were derived. They wear heavy wigs, thanks to which the transition between the snout of the animal or the beak of a bird and their human bodies takes place so smoothly that our aesthetic sense is scarcely violated and these hybrid beings seem almost real.

Much more remains to be said on the subject of the sacred animals. Certain animals, cats, hawks and ibis were venerated all over Egypt and to kill them was punishable by death. Pity for dead animals reached an almost unbelievable degree. To give an idea of this, it may be mentioned that crocodile cemeteries have been discovered where the reptiles were carefully mummified and buried with their newly born and even with their eggs.

Animals, birds, fish, reptiles of all kinds that were venerated by the ancient inhabitants of the Nile Valley were interred by the hundreds of thousands. An example of the abundance of these corpses can be found at Ben Hasan, where the cats' cemetery has been, commercially exploited for the extraction of artificial fertiliser. Perhaps Herodotus did not exaggerate when he wrote that the Egyptians were the most religious of people.