

## RITUALS RELATED TO ANIMAL CULTS الطقوس المتعلقة بطوائف الحيوانات

*Aidan Dodson*

---

### EDITORS

WILLEKE WENDRICH  
Editor-in-Chief  
University of California, Los Angeles

JACCO DIELEMAN  
Editor  
Area Editor Religion  
University of California, Los Angeles

ELIZABETH FROOD  
Editor  
University of Oxford

JOHN BAINES  
Senior Editorial Consultant  
University of Oxford

---

Short Citation:  
Dodson, 2009, Rituals Related to Animal Cults. *UEE*.

Full Citation:  
Dodson, Aidan, 2009, Rituals Related to Animal Cults. In Jacco Dieleman, Willeke Wendrich (eds.),  
*UCLA Encyclopedia of Egyptology*, Los Angeles.  
<http://digital2.library.ucla.edu/viewItem.do?ark=21198/zz001nf7d0>

---

## RITUALS RELATED TO ANIMAL CULTS

### الطقوس المتعلقة بطوائف الحيوانات

Aidan Dodson

Tierkulte

Cultes des animaux

*Two kinds of cult animal existed in ancient Egypt: specific faunal representatives of a given deity that lived in a temple and were ceremonially interred, and creatures killed and mummified to act as votive offerings. The former are attested from the earliest times, while the latter date from the Late Period and later.*

عرف نوعان من طوائف الحيوانات بمصر القديمة: فكانت تمثل الحيوانات الآلهة وتسكن بالمعبد وتدفن بشكل مراسمي. وعرف هذا من أول العصور المصرية، والنوع الثاني هو قتل الحيوانات وتحنيطها لتكون قرابين نذرية وهي عادة ظهرت بالعصر المتأخر وما بعده.



While there continues to be debate over precise definitions (cf. Kessler 2005), it seems broadly agreed that cult animals in Egypt fall into two distinct groups. The first are specific specimens of a given species that were held to be an earthly incarnation of a particular deity, or at least in whom the deity could become incarnate. Resident in the god's temple, they would be the subject of a suite of rituals, and would often receive elaborate treatment at death. These will be referred to as "Sacred Animals." The other group are representatives of a species whose embalmed remains could be offered by pilgrims coming to seek the favor of a deity ("Votive Animals"). There would normally only be one example of the first kind at a time; deposits of the second kind could run into the hundreds or even thousands within a short period of time. Animals were also, of course, employed in temples as sacrificial victims, but these fall outside the scope of this article.

Many of the gods and goddesses of ancient Egypt had animal forms. Obvious examples are the cat of Bastet, the ram of Khnum, the cow of Hathor, and the falcon of Horus,

which reflected the deities' iconic theriomorphic forms. However, Amun could also appear in the form of a goose, while a considerable number of deities had a bovine form. It is from the latter that our best evidence for the ritual that might surround a sacred animal comes. On the other hand, while it seems that bulls were allowed to live out their natural lives (although cf. below), other creatures were more ephemeral, for example a new falcon of Horus was installed each year at Edfu (Alliot 1949-: 600 - 601).

We know of a range of sacred bulls, including Bata of Cynopolis, Kemwer of Athribis, Hesbu of the 11<sup>th</sup> Upper Egyptian Nome, and the Siankh, known only from the Palermo Stone, which recounts its "running" in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Dynasty reign of Ninetjer. The three best attested, however, are the Apis (associated with Ptah), Mnevis (Ra), and Buchis (Montu) bulls. An inscription on a bowl formerly in the Michaelides Collection, naming the Horus Aha alongside Apis (Simpson 1957), appears to bear out a statement by the Roman writer Aelian that the cult was founded by Menes, while the "first occasion of running the Apis" is mentioned

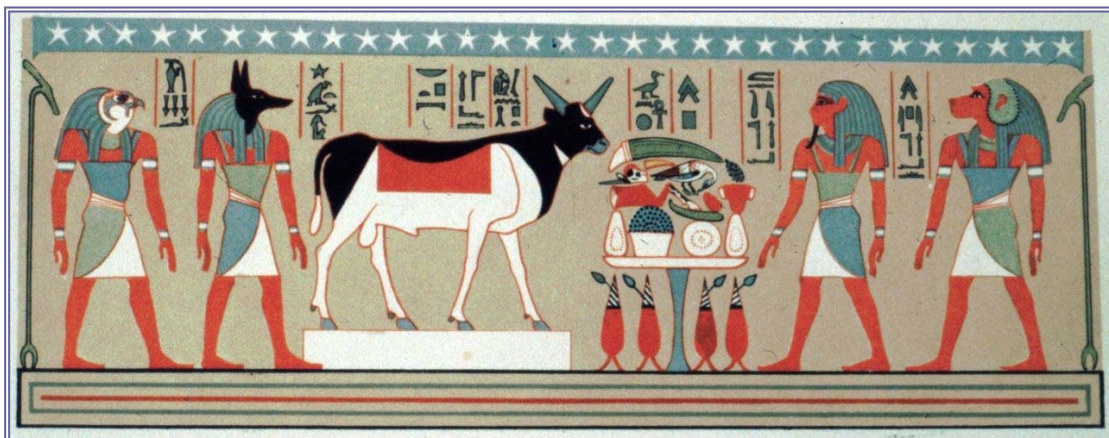


Figure 1. Copy of a wall painting from the tomb of an Apis buried during the reign of Horemheb, showing the bull's distinctive markings.

under king Den (?) in the Palermo Stone, and under the same king on a contemporary seal-impression in Saqqara tomb S3035 (Emery and Saad 1938: 64, fig. 26). At least two “running of the Apis” rituals occurred under Ninetjer (the second of them recorded on the Palermo Stone). The precise nature of these rituals is uncertain, but they may be related to later depictions of the Apis running alongside the king during the *Sed*-festival, for example on the Red Chapel of Hatshepsut at Karnak.

The Apis was recognized by distinctive white and black markings (fig. 1), and after the death of an incumbent bull, a search would be made for its successor on this basis. According to Diodorus Siculus (I: 85, Diodorus 1990: 107), “whenever one has died and has been buried in splendor, the priests who are charged with these matters seek out a young bull whose bodily markings are similar to those of its predecessor. When they find it, the people put away their mourning, and the priests whose duty it is conduct the bull calf to Nilopolis [near El-Wasta], where they keep it forty days; then they put it on a state barge with a gilded stall and convey it as a deity to the sanctuary of Hephaestus at Memphis.”

The earliest evidence for posthumous rituals concerning the Apis come from the late 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, when elaborate interments begin to be found at Saqqara, comprising above-ground chapels and subterranean burial chambers for each bull. These are succeeded



Figure 2. Gold mask from a mummiform mass incorporating fragmentary bull bones, belonging to an Apis bull dating to late in the reign of Ramesses II (Louvre 2291).

under Ramesses II by a series of catacombs in the same area, known collectively as the Serapeum. While later bulls were conventionally embalmed, the surviving 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Dynasty examples comprised broken osseous remains that had been formed into a mass using resin and linen, in at least one example molded into the simulacrum of a human mummy (fig. 2; Dodson 2005: 78 - 80). Given that the tombs also held jars of ashes, it is possible that the dead bull may have been cooked and ceremonially eaten,



Figure 3. Reconstruction of the mummy of a Buchis bull.



Figure 4. The ram cemetery in the temple of Khnum at Elephantine (view to the North).

perhaps by the king in an echo of the “Cannibal Hymn” in the Pyramid Texts (Utterances 273 - 4). On the basis of Plutarch (374 B: 56), Pliny (VIII: 71), and Ammianus Marcellinus (xxii, 14:7), it appears that by Roman times the bull’s maximum lifespan may have been fixed at 25 years, at which point a surviving bull was drowned (Pliny). However, there is no indication that this was the case earlier, and that practices regarding the Apis changed after the Ptolemaic Period is



Figure 5. Ram mummy from Elephantine (Nubian Museum, Aswan); the unnatural pose is common amongst large mummified animals.

shown by the termination of burials in the Serapeum under Augustus. From the 27<sup>th</sup> Dynasty until Cleopatra VII, the cows that had borne an Apis were interred in their own catacomb (Davies 2006: 11 - 54). The ritual employed in the late Ptolemaic Period is preserved in Papyrus Vienna 3873, which indicates a sequence of ritual washing, embalming, wrapping, encoffining, and ceremonial, closely matching that used for high-status humans (Vos 1993).

The Mnevis of Heliopolis is known from New Kingdom tombs and monuments (Dodson 2005: 92 - 95), but the Buchis bull of Upper Egypt first appears in the record at the end of the Late Period and continues to be attested well into Roman times (Goldbrunner 2004; Mond and Myers 1934). Although a catacomb, the Bucheum (fig. 3), was provided for him at Armant, the bull seems to have been a fusion of earlier bovine forms of Montu, and as such, rituals concerning the installation of the Buchis were carried out at Thebes, with the cult also existing at Tod and Medamud. It is at the latter site that we have evidence for the Buchis in an oracular role (Drioton 1926: 42 - 45). A living representation of a god such as a sacred animal was of course an obvious oracle-giver. Good examples of Demotic oracular petitions addressed to the Thoth have been recovered from the baboon/ibis catacombs at Tuna el-Gebel (Kessler and Nur el-Din 2005: 136 - 137). Other attested oracular creatures include the ram of Mendes (Kákosy 1981) and even a





Figure 6. Votive mummies of cats dating to the Roman Period (British Museum EA6752 and EA37348).



Figure 7. The Shunet el-Zebib, the funerary enclosure of Khasekhemwy at Abydos (view to the West), used for the burial of votive ibises.

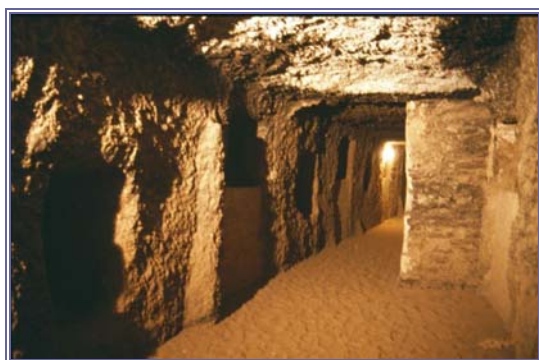


Figure 8. The catacombs of Tuna el-Gebel, showing the niches for the burial of baboons.

scarab beetle (Jasnow 1997), but the practice almost certainly existed wherever a sacred animal was to be found.

A multiple burial-place analogous to the Serapeum and Bucheum has been uncovered for the rams of Khnum on Elephantine (figs. 4-5), and remains deriving from such an installation have been found for the rams of Banebdjed at Mendes (Redford and Redford 2005). It is likely that the baboons buried in niches in the walls of the catacombs at Tuna el-Gebel represent a succession of sacred animals of Thoth. However, the latter also contain very large numbers of embalmed ibises, which are clearly representatives of the other variety of cult-animal, the votive creature.

Judging by the uniformity of their age at death and standardized treatment (cf. e.g., Armitage and Clutton-Brock 1980; Zivie and Lichtenberg 2005: 117 - 118), it seems clear that votive animals were bred specifically for the purpose on an industrial scale, killed when they reached a given size, and then mummified for sale to pilgrims at a number of sacred places around Egypt. The range of treatments and elaboration of wrappings suggests the production of something for every pocket (fig. 6). It seems that they were deposited in a temple by pilgrims – perhaps with a prayer to the god whispered in its ear – and when the temple became cluttered, they were taken to an appropriate burial place. At Abydos, ibis mummies were buried within the confines of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Dynasty Shunet el-Zebib enclosure (fig. 7), but subterranean arrangements are found at Tuna (fig. 8), Western Thebes, Tell Basta, and various other locations. Most important of all, however, are the series of catacombs at Saqqara.

As elsewhere, the catacombs of the Sacred Animal Necropolis at Saqqara seem to have been begun during the Late Period, and adjoin the aforementioned burial of the Mothers of Apis (fig. 9). They form part of a complex of temples and shrines located some 700 meters northeast of the Serapeum, together with major enclosures on the desert edge, and an as-yet little known set of chapels north and

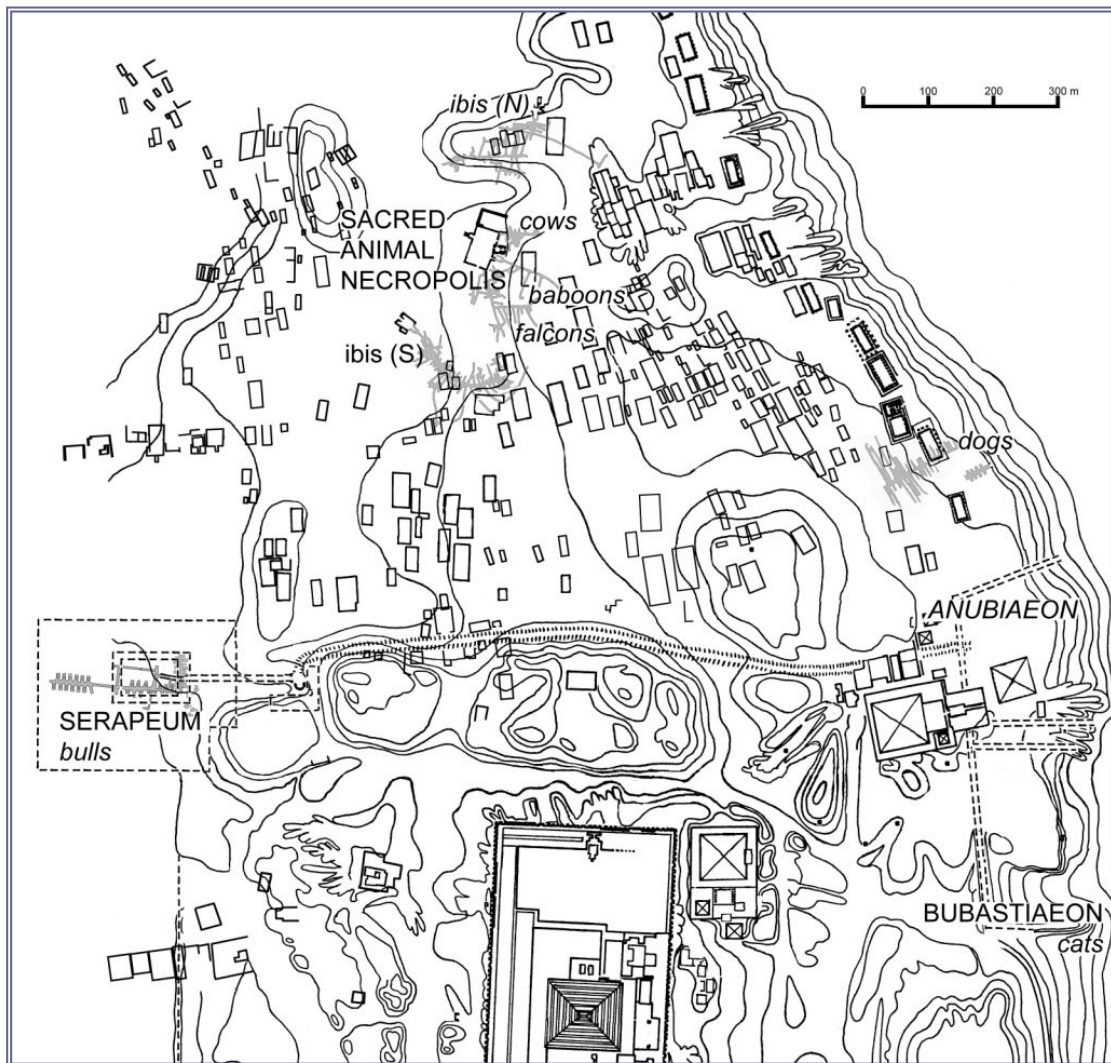


Figure 9. Map of Saqqara, showing the locations of the sacred animal catacombs.

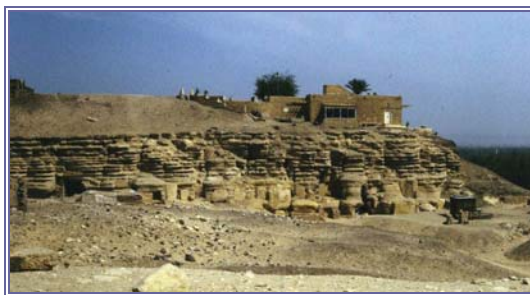


Figure 10. The escarpment at Saqqara (view to the North), with New Kingdom tomb chapels that were extended in Late and Ptolemaic times to house votive cat mummies.

south of the Serapeum. Separate catacombs exist of ibises, baboons, falcons, and dogs, while cats were interred in extensions of New Kingdom tomb chapels on the edge of the Saqqara escarpment (fig. 10). In addition to literally millions of mummified animals and birds, a number of deposits of bronze divine figures were also made in the Sacred Animal Necropolis, clearly also votives brought by pilgrims.

## *Bibliographic Notes*

The key sources are Kessler (1989) and Ikram (2005), which cover the full range of animal cults and burials. A selection of critical essays, including cross-cultural comparisons with types of non-Egyptian animal worship, can be found in Fitzenreiter (2005). Otto (1964) is the basic work on bull cults in general, while Mond and Myers (1934) contains not only a comprehensive report on the Buchis and its burial, but also summarizes much of the evidence for the Apis as well. For a recent study on the theology of the Buchis bull cult in Roman times based on the full range of materials, see Goldbrunner (2004). Mariette produced a number of works on the Apis (including (1857) and (1882)) but never completed the publication of his work; likewise the second volume of Malinine, Posener, and Vercoutter (1968) has yet to appear. Excavation reports on the Saqqara Sacred Animal Necropolis include Davies (2006), Davies and Smith (2005) and (2006), Jeffreys and Smith (1988), and Martin (1981), with further volumes in preparation; an excellent informal summary is Smith (1974). The ram cemetery at Elephantine remains unpublished, but the Tuna catacombs are covered by Boessneck, Kessler, and von den Driesch (1987-). The cult and care of sacred animals are also addressed in the so-called *Book of the Temple*, an as-of-yet unpublished indigenous treatise on the ideal temple (Quack 2005).

## *References*

- Alliot, Maurice  
1949- *Le culte d'Horus à Edfou au temps des Ptolémées*. (2 volumes: 1949 - 1954). Bibliothèque d'étude 20. Cairo: Institut français d'archéologie orientale.
- Armitage, P.L., and Juliet Clutton-Brock  
1980 Egyptian mummified cats held by the British Museum. *MASCA Research Papers in Science and Archaeology* 1(6), pp. 185 - 188.
- Boessneck, Joachim, Dieter Kessler, and Angela von den Driesch  
1987- *Tuna el-Gebel: Die Tiergalerien*. 2 vols. Hildesheimer ägyptologische Beiträge 24, 43. Hildesheim: Gerstenberg.
- Davies, Sue  
2006 *The sacred animal necropolis at North Saqqara: The mother of Apis and baboon catacombs: The archaeological report*. Excavation Memoir 76. London: Egypt Exploration Society.
- Davies, Sue, and H.S. Smith  
2005 *The sacred animal necropolis at North Saqqara: The falcon complex and catacomb: The archaeological report*. Excavation Memoir 73. London: Egypt Exploration Society.  
2006 *The sacred animal necropolis at North Saqqara: The main temple complex: The archaeological report*. Excavation Memoir 75. London: Egypt Exploration Society.
- Diodorus  
1990 *The antiquities of Egypt: A translation, with notes, of Book I of the Library of History of Diodorus Siculus*. Translated by Edwin Murphy. New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers.
- Dodson, Aidan  
2005 Bull cults. In *Divine creatures: Animal mummies in ancient Egypt*, ed. Salima Ikram, pp. 72 - 105. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press.
- Drioton, Étienne  
1926 *Rapport sur les fouilles de Médamoud (1925): Les inscriptions*. Fouilles de l'Institut français d'archéologie orientale 3. Cairo: Institut français d'archéologie orientale.
- Emery, Walter B., and Zaki Yusef Saad  
1938 *Excavations at Saqqara: The Tomb of Hemaka*. Cairo: Government Press.



Fitzenreiter, Martin (ed.)

- 2005 *Tierkulte im pharaonischen Ägypten und im Kulturvergleich: Beiträge eines Workshops am 7.6 und 8.6. 2002.* Internet-Beiträge zur Ägyptologie und Sudanarchäologie 4. London: Golden House Publications.

Goldbrunner, Lothar

- 2004 *Buchis: Eine Untersuchung zur Theologie des heiligen Stieres in Theben zur griechisch-römischen Zeit.* Monographies Reine Élisabeth 11. Turnhout: Brepols.

Ikram, Salima (ed.)

- 2005 *Divine creatures: Animal mummies in ancient Egypt.* Cairo: American University in Cairo Press.

Jasnaw, Richard

- 1997 A demotic omen text? (P. BM 10238). In *Essays on ancient Egypt in honour of Herman te Velde*, Egyptological Memoirs 1, ed. Jacobus van Dijk, pp. 207 - 218. Groningen: Styx.

Jeffreys, David, and Harry Smith

- 1988 *The Anubieion at Saqqâra I: The settlement and the temple precinct, with a chapter by M. Jessop Price.* Egypt Exploration Society Excavation Memoir 54. London: Egypt Exploration Society.

Kákósy, László

- 1981 Prophecies of ram gods. In *Selected papers (1956-73)*, Studia Aegyptiaca 7; Études Publiées par les Chaires d'Histoire Ancienne de l'Université Loránd Eötvös de Budapest 33, pp. 139 - 154. Budapest: Université Loránd Eötvös, Chaire de l'Histoire de l'Orient Ancien. (Originally published in 1966.)

Kessler, Dieter

- 1989 *Die heiligen Tiere und der König.* Ägypten und Altes Testament 16. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.  
2005 Tierische Missverständniss: Grundsätzliches zu Fragen des Tierkultes. In *Tierkulte im pharaonischen Ägypten und im Kulturvergleich: Beiträge eines Workshops am 7.6 und 8.6. 2002*, Internet-Beiträge zur Ägyptologie und Sudanarchäologie 4, ed. Martin Fitzenreiter, pp. 33 - 67. London: Golden House Publications.

Kessler, Dieter, and Abd el Halim Nur el-Din

- 2005 Millions of ibises and other animals. In *Divine creatures: Animal mummies in ancient Egypt*, ed. Salima Ikram, pp. 120 - 163. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press.

Malinine, Michel, Georges Posener, and Jean Vercoutter

- 1968 *Catalogue des stèles du Sérapéum de Memphis.* 2 vols. Paris: Éditions des musées nationaux.

Mariette, Auguste

- 1857 *Le Sérapéum de Memphis decouvert et décrit par Aug. Mariette. Ouvrage dédié à S. A. I. Mgr. le Prince Napoléon et publié sous les auspices de S. E. M. Achille Fould, ministre d'état.* Paris: Gide.  
1882 *Le Sérapéum de Memphis par Auguste Mariette-Pacha: Publié d'après le manuscrit d'auteur par G. Maspero* 1. Paris: F. Vieweg.

Martin, Geoffrey

- 1981 *The sacred animal necropolis at North Saqqara: The southern dependencies of the main temple complex.* Excavation Memoir 50. London: Egypt Exploration Society.

Mond, Sir Robert, and Oliver Humphrys Myers

- 1934 *The Bucheum.* Excavation Memoir 41. London: Egypt Exploration Society.

Otto, Eberhard

- 1964 *Beiträge zur geschichte der Stierkulte in Ägypten.* Untersuchungen zur Geschichte und Altertumskunde Ägyptens 13. Hildesheim: G. Olms.

Quack, Joachim

- 2005 Die Rolle des heiligen Tieres im Buch vom Tempel. In *Tierkulte im pharaonischen Ägypten und im Kulturvergleich: Beiträge eines Workshops am 7.6 und 8.6. 2002*, ed. Martin Fitzenreiter, pp. 111 - 123. London: Golden House Publications.



Redford, Susan, and Donald B. Redford

2005 The cult and necropolis and the sacred ram at Mendes. In *Divine creatures: Animal mummies in ancient Egypt*, ed. Salima Ikram, pp. 164 - 198. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press.

Simpson, William Kelly

1957 A running of the Apis in the reign of 'Aha and passages in Manetho and Aelian. *Orientalia* 26, pp. 139 - 142.

Smith, Harry S.

1974 *A visit to ancient Egypt: Life at Memphis and Saqqara, c. 500 - 30 BC*. Warminster: Aris & Phillips Ltd.

Vos, René L.

1993 *The Apis embalming ritual: P. Vindob. 3873*. *Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta* 50. Leuven: Peeters.

Zivie, Alain, and Roger Lichtenberg

2005 The cats of the goddess Bastet. In *Divine creatures: Animal mummies in ancient Egypt*, ed. Salima Ikram, pp. 106 - 119. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press.

## *Image Credits*

- Figure 1. Copy of a wall painting from the tomb of an Apis buried during the reign of Horemheb, showing the bull's distinctive markings (Mariette 1857: pl. 3).
- Figure 2. Gold mask from a mummiform mask incorporating fragmentary bull bones, belonging to an Apis bull dating to late in the reign of Ramesses II (Louvre 2291; Photo courtesy of Aidan Dodson).
- Figure 3. Reconstruction of the mummy of a Buchis bull (Mond and Myers 1934).
- Figure 4. The ram cemetery in the temple of Khnum at Elephantine (view to the North) (Photo courtesy of Aidan Dodson).
- Figure 5. Ram mummy from Elephantine (Nubian Museum, Aswan); the unnatural pose is common amongst large mummified animals (Photo courtesy of Aidan Dodson).
- Figure 6. Votive mummies of cats dating to the Roman Period (British Museum EA6752 and EA37348; Photo courtesy of Aidan Dodson).
- Figure 7. The Shunet el-Zebib, the funerary enclosure of Khasekhemwy at Abydos (view to the West), used for the burial of votive ibises (Photo courtesy of Aidan Dodson).
- Figure 8. The catacombs of Tuna el-Gebel, showing the niches for the burial of baboons (Photo courtesy of Aidan Dodson).
- Figure 9. Map of Saqqara, showing the locations of the sacred animal catacombs (Map courtesy of Aidan Dodson).
- Figure 10. The escarpment at Saqqara (view to the North), with New Kingdom tomb chapels that were extended in Late and Ptolemaic times to house votive cat mummies (Photo courtesy of Aidan Dodson).