



## **SACRED DEITIES OF ANCIENT EGYPT:**

### **A PANTHEON OF PARADOXES**

Jacqueline Thurston

## DREAMS OF LIONS: A REVERIE

Before you read further, pause for a moment and imagine the world in which ancient Egyptians lived—one populated by dangerous creatures both large and small, including lions, panthers, crocodiles, hippos, cobras, scorpions, and poisonous vipers.

Egyptologists have identified New Kingdom inscriptions that compare the war cry of the king as he rode into battle in his horse-drawn chariot to the roaring of lions. A rare inscription in which the sounds of the fury of battle were likened to the roaring of lions from a mountaintop has also been discovered. This vivid soundscape, which equates the sound of lions roaring from mountain peaks with the sound of the pharaoh's army clashing with his enemy, is unforgettable.

While I was photographing in Egypt, I was drawn to explore the visualization of lions and lionesses as deities. I should not have been surprised, when I was awakened one morning with the gift of a dream fragment. In my dream, night had fallen and I was walking through a field of lightly sleeping lions. Their shaggy manes rested on their great paws. They lay close to one another, so I had to tread carefully. I had been given a sound to keep me safe—the soft cluck-cluck of a hen. The sound felt barely adequate to protect me from a field of slumbering lions. As I threaded my way carefully through their midst, the lions stirred but did not awaken.

This was the first appearance of the hen and the lion in my dreamscape. As I aged, this dream motif changed, and it became my task to protect an imposing but vulnerable red-brown hen in a fragile wire cage from a roaming lion. With the passage of time, I felt both unnerved and strangely comforted by these images, which I believe are messages that awakened me to my own mortality. And then, quite unexpectedly, just

before the anesthesia required for a retinal procedure took hold, a lioness, not a lion, curled up beside me. Lions and lionesses have been reminders of the formidable, or so it seemed, challenges I faced in Egypt, emblems of my mortality, and protective presences. The imposing red-brown hen with her vivid yellow beak, bright eyes, and red comb remained a mystery for years until I realized, quite spontaneously, that she and I were both solo travelers faced with a series of difficult tasks we had to finish alone.

A few months ago, I once again found myself in an operating room; this time the surgery was a late-night emergency intervention. I waited for the lioness but she did not appear. Instead, floating above the operating table, her great wingspan dominating the ceiling, was a new apparition, Nekhbet, the vulture goddess. I found her uninvited appearance unsettling. When her image stubbornly persisted, I slowly began to absorb the import of her role as one of the principal protectors of the pharaoh, a role she shares with the cobra goddess Wadjet. The visitation of Nekhbet, formidable enough to be a guardian of kings, invited me to accept her imposing presence, her cruel curved beak and talons, even her association with carrion and dead flesh, as the perfect companion for the moment.

As I write in the spring of 2022, I cannot know what has led you to read this written reflection, but I hope that it will deepen your personal connection to the masculine and feminine deities drawn from the pages of the book I have written, illustrated with my photographs, *Sacred Deities of Ancient Egypt*.

## LIONESSES, LIONS, AND THE SPHINX



**Figure 1** *The head of an archer fused with the head of a lion arises from the body of a horse. Depicted on an astrological ceiling, the fantastic winged archer is protected by the curved tail and stinger of a scorpion. Temple of Hathor, Dendera.*

## REFLECTIONS ON GENDER AND IDENTITY IN THE ANCIENT EGYPTIAN

## PANTHEON

Our contemporary interest in gender and identity makes the exploration of the attributes of both feminine and masculine deities in the ancient Egyptian pantheon

intriguing, informative, and relevant. The following excerpts from the book I have written and illustrated with my photographs, *Sacred Deities of Ancient Egypt*, explore the pantheon—seeking to untangle the threads of these themes in the process.

We live in a contemporary cultural vortex—one in which we crave clear, decisive answers to complex questions about the nature of gender and identity. The following reflections drawn from the ancient Egyptian pantheon remind us to celebrate the complexity, paradoxes, and dualities that these questions raise.

### KINGS, QUEENS, GODS AND GODDESSES



**Figure 2** Wearing the dual crown of the two lands, the creator god Atum offers the ankh and was scepter to the king. Temple of Seti I, Abydos.



**Figure 3** *A colossal figure of Hatshepsut in the guise of Osiris, an affirmation that she, like Osiris, will be reborn. Hatshepsut's temple, Deir el-Bahri.*



**Figure 4** *A fragment of a head of Hatshepsut with large, expressive eyes, one of the many large-scale Osiride statues erected at her temple. Hatshepsut's temple, Deir el-Bahri.*

When painted with a broad brush in the kingdom of the gods, goddesses were more fearsome than their masculine counterparts. While there are intriguing examples of women who assumed the throne, Hatshepsut being one of the most famous of them, kings were clearly more powerful than queens. The monuments erected in honor of Nefertiti and Nefertari imply that they were cherished as Great Royal Wives for their intelligence, charismatic personalities, and legendary beauty.



**Figure 5** *Accompanied by her soul, a ba bird, Queen Nefertari kneels in an attitude of praise. Tomb of Nefertari, Valley of the Queens.*

### LIONESSES, LIONS, AND THE SPHINX

Masculine leonine figures were emblems of royal power and guardian figures of the rising and setting sun. As sphinxes, they were mythic protectors of tombs and temples. Feminine leonine deities were formidable and indomitable goddesses whose vengeful, destructive natures could be propitiated to release their nurturing, healing, and creative gifts.

The aggressive, nurturing, and protective powers evoked by images of lions and lionesses gave birth to a rich cosmology of sacred forms, ranging from the colossal figure of the Great Sphinx to devotional figures of the household cat goddess, Bastet. When the essence of the lioness was embodied in a feminine figure, she was a ferocious and awe-inspiring being. The feline and the feminine were deeply associated with one another in



the cosmology of ancient Egypt. The prowess of feminine leonine deities and the stories associated with them were richly layered and filled with intriguing paradoxes. The opposing interwoven strands of nurturing maternal qualities and instinctual savage aggression were embedded in the enigmatic heart of these paradoxes. Their features, drawn from the lioness, enriched their apotropaic powers and ferocious appearance.

### SEKHMET: THE FEMALE POWERFUL ONE

The majestic power of the lionesses that roamed and hunted in the land bordering the Nile was embodied in a central leonine deity, Sekhmet, whose name means “the female powerful one.” The many titles attributed to Sekhmet reflect the terror she inspired. Of all the lioness deities, she was regarded as the most ferocious. She was known as the Avenger of Wrongs and Lady of Slaughter. Consistent with the duality of her being, Sekhmet was both a healing deity, whose priestesses were believed to be skilled in the art of medicine, and a destructive deity capable of unleashing disease and pestilence upon the land. It is intriguing to note that her son was Nefertum, the god intimately associated with the blue lotus, a symbol of rebirth, and her consort, Ptah, was one of the creator gods. The polar opposites of destructive aggression and beneficent healing are balanced by the rebirth and creation in the masculine figures with whom she is intimately associated.

Ferocity and the nurturing, protective nature of the lioness merged in the mythic, dualistic psyche of Sekhmet. Wearing a long tripart wig crowned with a sun disk, this majestic deity was portrayed with the head of a lioness and the body of an elegant woman. The lioness deity Sekhmet was the beneficent and wrathful protector of the

pharaoh and his kingdom. When desert windstorms filled with stinging sand particles scorched the fields and turned midday to dusk, ancient Egyptians believed they felt the hot breath of Sekhmet blowing in their midst. These winds, once believed to be the breath of a wrathful lioness deity desiccating the land, are known today by the Arabic word *khamsin*. Their name derived from the word for “fifty,” these windstorms are believed to rage for fifty days each year. In their most intense form, contemporary sandstorms are disruptive and potentially dangerous, closing airports, darkening the daylight hours of cities, and turning the sun an eerie unnatural hue. It is imperative to pause and remember that the periodically catastrophic sandstorms of modern Egypt once filled the ancient world with terror, making life seem unimaginably unpredictable and dangerous. Today, these winds are intrusive, but in ancient Egypt, they were potentially life-changing. The primal force of the untamed desert winds was mirrored in the very breath of the lioness goddess Sekhmet. Although Sekhmet’s ferocity as a protector of the pharaoh was legendary, she could also be portrayed as a guardian of the sun god. In depictions of Ra’s voyage through the underworld, Sekhmet was portrayed standing in the prow of the sun god’s barque defending him against the depredations of the serpent Apophis.



**Figure 6** “Sekhmet the Great, Beloved of Ptah.” Sekhmet’s outstretched hand curves protectively around the shoulder of her son, Nefertum. Sekhmet’s lithe feminine figure culminates in the head of a lioness. Temple of Seti I, Abydos.

Carved in limestone, the reliefs on the temple walls of Seti I at Abydos are marvelously elegant and refined. At Abydos, stonemasons carved images so delicate that it feels as if they might have been drawn with a painter’s brush. In this beautiful temple, the fluid nature of a raised relief image of Sekhmet gives her a gentle and beneficent aura. Sekhmet is portrayed seated behind her son, Nefertum, god of the primeval lotus, a symbol of rebirth. The long fingers of her outstretched hand curve gently around his shoulder. The intimacy of the moment is subtle and exceptionally beautiful to behold.

## THE EYE OF RA



**Figure 7** *Hathor, one of the Eye goddesses portrayed as a beautiful woman with cow's ears. Hatshepsut's temple, Deir el-Bahri.*

The awe-inspiring title, the Eye of Ra, an epithet bestowed upon the first female being and solar goddess, was shared by Sekhmet, Mut, Bastet, and a powerful female deity associated with the cow, the goddess Hathor. The vision of the sun as an all-seeing eye dominating the sky represented ferocity and brutality as well as creative energy. The fluid nature of the deities created a mythos in which Mut could also represent a more beneficent aspect of Sekhmet.



**Figure 8** *Hathor crowned with a naos shrine and uraei. Hatshepsut's temple, Deir el-Bahri.*

## VIRTUOUS OF COUNTENANCE

The nightly voyage of the sun god through the underworld required safe passage through portals, gates, or pylons before arriving in the afterlife, known as the Kingdom of Osiris. Traditionally, in the Valley of the Kings, tombs portrayed twelve gates, symbolic of the twelve hours of the night. Each gate was guarded by remarkable creatures, often part human and part animal, endowed with unique protective powers. Ra and the deceased king or queen, fused with the figure of the sun god, navigated the challenges of the perilous passage through these portals before arriving safely in the afterlife. The guardian deity protecting each portal permitted passage only to those who knew his or her secret name. Knowledge of this heraldic secret name granted ultimate power over the guardian of the gate to Ra or the deceased ruling figure fused with the sun god. As many as a thousand guardian deities are known to have existed. Vivid and evocative titles were bestowed upon the protectors of the gates, including Mistress of Anger Dancing Upon Blood. Other equally compelling guardian deities and demons remained untitled threatening presences, their names lost to time.



**Figure 9** *Virtuous of Countenance, a gate guardian figure. Tomb of Nefertari, Valley of the Queens.*

On the west wall of the burial tomb of Nefertari, three guardian figures protect the queen's passage through the second gate to the afterlife. Standing in the center of the triad, wielding a great curved knife in each hand, a riveting feminine deity bears the inscription *Virtuous of Countenance*. This fantastic being, part animal, part human, assumes the anthropomorphic form of a lioness. A pair of snakes with amber eyes rear protectively above her green muzzle and deep blue tripart wig. The color green is emblematic of the regeneration promised the deceased queen at the end of the night of twelve hours. A band of small black lines creates a border that wraps around the big

cat's ear, dividing her leonine head from the traditional human wig she wears. Her muzzle bristles with crisp brushstrokes that deftly define whiskers and dramatically outline a bold outward-looking eye whose amber hue echoes that of the eyes of the twin snakes rising from her head. The lion-headed woman, who wears a dress the color of blood, resonates with portrayals of Sekhmet as the fearsome protectress of the realm.

### THE KING AS A SPHINX



**Figure 10** *The royal sphinx fuses the body of a lion with the head of Seti I wearing an atef crown. The sphinx presents a bowl overflowing with offerings. Temple of Seti I, Abydos.*



The feline held great appeal for the Egyptians. During the vast sweep of the religious history of Egypt, the cosmology is believed to have given birth to as many as forty sacred cats and lionesses, all feminine. With the exception of a pair of lions known as Rwtj, guardians of the horizon, the relationship between leonine figures and the masculine took a different form.

The famous avenue of the sphinxes at Karnak Temple affirmed the power of the pharaoh and placed him under the protection of a fantastic leonine deity. Statues of the king stood poised between the forelegs and paws of a row of sphinxes lining the grand entrance to the temple. These sphinxes, symbols of the creator god Amun worshipped at Karnak, were mythic composite creatures that fused the head of a ram with the body of a lion. Sphinxes crowned with the human head of the reigning pharaoh were expressions of the king's capacity to defend the kingdom and protect Egypt from her foes. Although images of the sphinx traditionally bore the head of the ruling king, there are examples of exceptionally potent female rulers, such as Tiye, Amenhotep III's queen, and Hatshepsut, who were also portrayed as sphinxes. The formulation of the king or queen as a sphinx, a mythical beast, part human and part animal, forged a symbol that fused human intelligence, animal virility, and raw power. Enigmatic images of the sphinx merged the body of the lion with the head of other creatures, including the falcon and the crocodile. These sphinxes were guardian figures called upon to protect tombs and temples. In a chapel dedicated to the celestial falcon at the Temple of Seti I at Abydos, the imposing forelegs and paws of the royal sphinx of the ruling pharaoh Seti I were envisioned as elegant human arms with graceful hands bearing a richly laden offering bowl. His sphinx was an iconic image that integrated animal instinct and ferocity with human intelligence and morality. As a sphinx, the deified king became a transcendent

being uniquely endowed with the capacity to serve as a guardian of the sun god, protecting him from his enemies. The context in which this royal sphinx of a living king appears is fascinating. The royal sphinx of Seti I is portrayed as a statue within an elaborate piece of ritual furniture ornamented with a band in which the *tyet* of Isis alternates with the *djed* pillar of her beloved consort, Osiris. Thousands of years ago, the chapel was a ceremonial space, animated by rituals celebrating the dynamic presence within the chamber of the rising sun, the celestial falcon, and the guardian of the sun, the royal sphinx of Seti I.

### THE PHARAOH AND THE LION



**Figure 11** A living lion accompanies a colossal figure of a pharaoh. The lion is portrayed devouring a row of bound kneeling captives. Tomb of Sobek, a crocodile god, and Horus the Elder, a falcon god; Kom Ombo.

At the Temple of Sobek and Horus the Elder, set on a promontory overlooking the Nile, sunlight and shadow play on a dramatic depiction of the symbiotic relationship between the king and the royal lion who accompanies him. An imposing expression of the grandeur of the king, the striding lion stands poised to devour a human hand submissively extended from a row of stylized kneeling captive figures. The import of the subjugation of invading armies extended beyond the triumph of military conquests. Defeat of the enemy, symbols of chaos, confirmed the divine order represented by the reigning king. A symbol of royal power, the magnificent lion prepares to consume the enemies of the king. His imposing body is transformed into a sacramental vessel that contains the potency of the invader's chaotic forces and renews the power of the king.

### LION BIER



**Figure 12** Rays of sunlight illuminate the figure of Osiris lying on a leonine bier incised in the walls of a light well in a small chapel. The degradation of the chapel ceiling has not completely erased the wing of a celestial hawk, which may be found in the lower right corner of the photograph. Temple of Hathor, Dendera.

Sunlight streams through a light well in the ceiling of a small rooftop chapel in the Temple of Hathor at Dendera. Iridescent patches of mold, in concert with inevitable degradations caused by the passage of time, have transformed the ceiling into a painterly surface dominated by eerie patches of blue and hues of luminous green and brown. Unaltered by the knowing touch of a restorer's hand, the ceiling is almost completely devoid of any traces of its original color and texture. The singular opening in the stone ceiling creates a transitional space between the somber interior and the luminous sky. Within the liminal chamber that opens to the sky, a shaft of sunlight illuminates an image of the body of Osiris, the god of the underworld, laid on a bier. A band of hieroglyphs above the bier implies a boundary between the known and unknown. Light dancing on the chiseled stone surface opening to the sky suggests the existence of an energy field. The shimmering rays of light create a transcendent atmosphere that affirms the promise of the resurrection of the body in another realm. The regal nature and indisputable power of the lion are symbolized by the noble head, elegant curved tail, and powerful legs that transform the bier into the body of a great animal, whose place in the kingdom of animals affirms the supremacy of the pharaoh.

## RWTY



**Figure 13** Wall fragment of a pair of Rwti lions, guardians of the rising and setting sun, shown nestled in the hieroglyph for the horizon. Tomb of Nefertari, Valley of the Queens.

A remarkable fragment of a pair of male leonine deities graces one of the many magnificent chambers of the burial tomb of Queen Nefertari in the Valley of the Queens. Rwti means “twin” or “pair.” In the queen’s tomb chamber, the lion and his double, guardians of the horizon, were once rendered back-to-back. Ironically, one of the magnificent lions no longer exists. Faced with the void created by the missing image, visitors to the ancient sepulcher long to rewind time, resurrect the image, and witness the pristine original. Rwti’s missing twin is a poignant reminder of the vicissitudes of time and the vagaries of fate. The cultural desire to create a monument capable of enduring for eternity was, and is, an illusion.

The absence of one of the original Rwtly lions heightens the visual import of its counterpart. The remaining lion god's great mane is evoked by an imaginative pattern, a skein of fine lines ornamented with circles. The deft abbreviated brushwork of this image startles our modern sensibility, which tends to associate the graphic clarity and brevity of stylized description with the language of contemporary art. Incisive strokes describe the whiskers, snout, and curved jowls of the lion. Each brushstroke appears to be premeditated, reverently considered, and then executed without hesitation. The remarkable rendition bristles with aliveness. Against the backdrop of the hand-chiseled cave wall, the remaining plaster surface bearing the eloquent fragment of the deity Rwtly appears to emerge out of the past into the present.

The Rwtly lions were usually portrayed facing in opposite directions with the hieroglyph for the horizon on their backs. The horizon hieroglyph consists of a heraldic sun disk set in a stylized image of a valley bounded on either side by mirror-image mountains. Rwtly's role as a guardian of the horizon celebrated the daily death and rebirth of the sun and paid homage to the rising sun in the east and the setting sun in the west. In variations of this mythic visualization, Rwtly could be portrayed as a solitary lion or anthropomorphically as a male figure with the head of a lion. Rwtly was also known as Yesterday and Tomorrow, a reference to the sun as a symbol of the passage of time. The divine twin lions were guardians of the horizon, a threshold or liminal passage associated with danger, as such transitions always are.

## THE LEOPARD AND THE PRIEST



**Figure 14** A field of hieroglyphs wraps around the hand of a sem priest, who wears the pelt of a leopard. Tomb of Nefertari, Valley of the Queens.

Priests associated with memorial temples, edifices dedicated to elaborate rituals that prepared the body of the king for burial, were known as *sem* priests. They were often portrayed wearing the skin of a leopard, an animal closely associated with the lion. As the *sem* priest presided over elaborate funeral rituals, he would have felt the weight of the leopard's head against his chest, the brush of the animal's tail against his legs, and

the chill of its curved claws against his arms. Members of the *sem* priesthood were intimately connected to the primal essence of the animal whose pelts they wore. The commanding presence of the *sem* priests reflected the reverence and respect they felt for the prowess of the leopard as well as for their arcane knowledge of the rituals that would defy death and ensure immortality.

Lions were an expression of the regal nature of the kingship, while male leopards and panthers (black leopards) were emblems of the unbridled aggression and wrath of the god Seth. Although both gods and goddesses were associated with the lion, only kings, *sem* priests, male gods, and one feminine deity, Seshat, the goddess of writing, were depicted wearing a garment made from the skin of a leopard. In the many-layered iconography of this culture, the king could be depicted acting in the role of a *sem* priest, and his regalia could include miniature leopard pelts. For *sem* priests, the panther and the leopard seem to have been emblems of rituals and settings associated with death and the underworld. Perhaps the bold black patterns of the leopard's coat were a symbolic expression of the void that death left in the light-filled world of the living, making the pelt an appropriate emblem of a funeral priesthood charged with the preservation of the body for eternity.

Writing in his late nineties, the American poet Stanley Kunitz used the words "wild braid" to describe the creative impulse that bound his garden and his poems together. The metaphor and poem sprang from his discovery in autumn of the bodies of two intertwined snakes dangling from an old spruce tree. Egypt's ancient gods, both female and male, were part of an equally wild metaphysical braid of intricately interwoven strands. As a species, we experience "the world" as being composed of gender. It is the touchstone of our understanding. It is natural, perhaps inevitable, for us



to look to one of the world's great early civilizations for guidance in the arena of masculine and feminine dynamics.



**Figure 15** Djed pillar, a symbol of Osiris, Lord of Underworld and Queen Nefertari. Tomb of Nefertari.



**Jacqueline Thurston, M.A.**, is an artist, writer and Professor Emerita in the School of Art and Design at San Jose State University, where she taught for over forty years. She is twice the recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Photography Fellowship and was a Fulbright Scholar to Egypt. Thurston's photographs are in major national and international museum collections, including the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; the Library of Congress; the International Museum of Photography; the Carnegie Museum of Art; the Albright-Knox

Museum; the Cantor Museum; the University of New Mexico Museum of Art; the Center for Photography at Arizona University; the Bibliothèque Nationale, France; and the Bibliothèque Alexandria, Egypt.