

Article

A Bronze Reliquary for an Ichneumon Dedicated to the Egyptian Goddess Wadjet

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Abstract: This is a short introduction to the hieroglyphic nature of ancient Egyptian material culture and its polyvalence using a bronze statuette of a lioness-headed goddess in front of an obelisk (formerly in the Omar Pasha Sultan Collection) as a case study. Because the lioness is not identified by an accompanying inscription, the essay demonstrates methods by which the identification and significance of the image can be unpacked.

Keywords: cat; heka; ichneumon; Leto; lioness; myth of the distant goddess; obelisk; Osiris; Sakhmet; sultan Omar pasha collection

One begins with a discussion about the hieroglyphic nature of ancient Egyptian art¹ by noting, first, that the tenets which govern the design of the hieroglyphs are precisely those which govern the design of ancient Egyptian visual representations. Sign and image are inseparable. More specifically, ancient Egyptian nouns and verbs are often suffixed by one or more signs that are not vocalized because they serve as unvoiced ideograms that determine their immediately preceding sound signs by attempting to provide a visual clue with regard to their meaning.² Barbara Richter discusses the polyvalence inherent in *i3s*, *bald*, and *Racheli Shalomi-Hen* demonstrates how the verb, *sr*, to foresee, determined by a giraffe, can also connote the modern expression of “to chicken out.”³ This polyvalence is emphasized by the fact that the noun ‘*w.t*, small cattle, can be determined by any number of horned, African ruminants,⁴ a herd of which a modern commentator might never expect to associate with farm animals. To these individual examples can be added the extended discussions of Stephen Houston and Andréas Stauder, who demonstrate that such hieroglyphs possess a dense mode of visual communication that cannot be reduced to a single meaning.⁵ Their position is reinforced by Hany Rashwan, who argues that the ancient Egyptian system of determinatives is so unique in its extreme richness that its use generates multivalent meanings in each and every word.⁶

Because ancient Egyptian art is hieroglyphic, it is, likewise, characterized by polyvalence. As a result, the meaning, significance, and interpretation of any one entity—be it a hieroglyph, an object—real or created—or an architectural structure—are all ambivalent. The concept has already been described by others, including Erik Horning.⁷ Camilla Di Biase-Dyson explores this inherent polyvalence in her unpacking of a so-called inscribed, birthing brick in Berlin from a lexical point of view. She conclusively demonstrates that the inscriptions on this particular brick reveal that a papyrus scroll would have been used for the ritual purpose to which this brick was put and that the brick itself was a “stand-in” for the execution of that ritual purpose rather than facilitating it.⁸ Kathlyn M. Cooney discusses the multiplicity of meanings inherent in coffins of the Third Intermediate Period. Her study reveals that an ancient Egyptian coffin could be simultaneously regarded as “a home, a fortress, a tomb, temple, and even as a magical provisioning device for food.”⁹ The same polyvalence is operative in the ancient Egyptian understanding of the function of the Temple of Isis at Dendera, which was anciently named, *st-msḥnt*, the place of birth.¹⁰ That designation was often more narrowly defined by the use of numerous, other nuanced



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designations—*pr-mswt*, *ḥt-wtt*, *ḥt-p^c*, *ḥt-nmyt*, *ḥt-ḥnmt*, *s't-nt-ḥ*—all of which connote subtle differences in function, which are lost in their generic translation as a “place of birth.”¹¹ Richard Bussmann provides an informative summary of the issue of polyvalence, which he prefers to regard from a praxeological context, in which any aspect of ancient Egypt’s material culture might have meant different things to different individuals.¹² Accordingly, the material culture of ancient Egypt cannot be quantified by reliance upon Aristotelian categorization into which meaning, significance, and interpretation can be neatly sorted into discrete pigeon-holes. One size does not fit all (Figure 1).

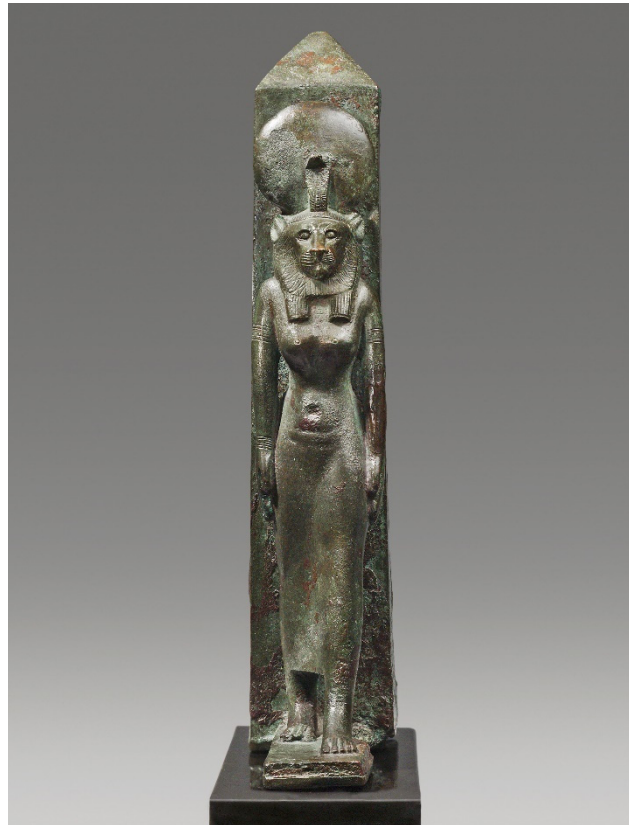


Figure 1. A bronze reliquary for an ichneumon dedicated to the Egyptian goddess Wadjet, front view. (Private collection, courtesy of the owner).

The principal figure of the group composition under discussion is a leonine-headed goddess,¹³ which had formerly been in the Omar Pasha Sultan collection¹⁴ She is designed striding forward on an integral plinth with her left leg advanced. Both of her arms are held parallel to the sides of her body with the palms of their hands open and pressed against her thighs. She is shown wearing a tightly-fitting sheath, the only indication of which is its hem ending just above the level of her ankles. The gossamer quality of the fine linen from which this sheath is woven reveals details of her anatomy, which includes the horizontal folds over her pubic triangle, her deeply recessed navel, and the two incised, small circles representing the nipples on her breasts. In keeping with ancient Egyptian design tenets, the fingers of her hands appear to be somewhat disproportionately long and are designed, as are the toes of her feet, without any indication of either their joints or nails. Her accessories include a pair of armlets and bracelets, designed as incised lines intended to represent an upper and lower thin, horizontal band that frames and holds into position a series of square, metope-like panels decorated with geometric designs. She wears a striated, tripartite wig, the lappets of which rest upon her upper chest. Her only attribute is a large sun disc fronted by the upright hood of a cobra, or sacred uraeus, resting upon her head (Figure 2).

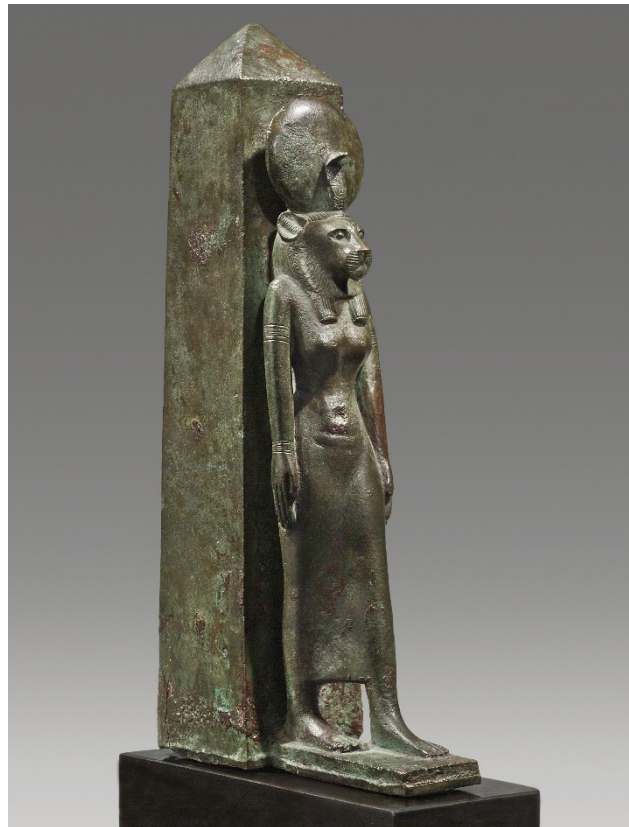


Figure 2. A bronze reliquary for an ichneumon dedicated to the Egyptian goddess Wadjet, three-quarter view from the right (Private collection, courtesy of the owner).

The absence of any accompanying inscriptions initially renders the identification of this goddess moot because ancient Egyptian religious tenets mandate that one species can represent a number of different deities.¹⁵ Certain points must, therefore, be passed in review before identification can be made. Such identifications often rely upon the principle that the design of ancient Egyptian images include coded visual messages upon which an identification can be based. It is to two of these coded visual clues on this bronze group to which one now turns.

First and foremost is the observation that the breasts and articulated pubic mound clearly indicate that this leonine figure is female. Although a pharaoh is very frequently compared to a mighty lion, the overwhelming number of ancient Egyptian leonine deities are goddesses.¹⁶ And yet, contrary to popular opinion about just how naturalistic ancient Egyptian representations of animals are, a lioness in the wild does not have a mane, which is a hallmark of the male of the species. To argue that the ancient Egyptians were aware of the fact that in certain instances, a lioness may exhibit a mane¹⁷ and so replicated it in their representations is specious in the extreme because detailed studies of ancient Egyptian representations of animals have repeatedly demonstrated just how non-discriminating the ancient Egyptian were in their seemingly disregard to distinguish a jackal from a dog,¹⁸ an otter from a mongoose,¹⁹ a crocodile from a scorpion,²⁰ and all of the horned, African ruminants from one another.²¹ Representations of animals served as religious and political symbols, the zoological identifications of which are often impossible to determine because there appears to have been no imperatives for the canonical representation of any given species, as the variations in the depictions of donkeys so firmly reveal.²² To insist, therefore, that the presence of a mane on a lioness is based on natural observations flies in the face of this cumulative evidence.²³

The reason behind this apparent gender-bending conflation, the presence of a lion's mane wreathing the head of a lioness, resides in the ancient Egyptian concept of felines. The ancient Egyptian noun for lion, *pA-mAj*, and that for cat, *pA-mjw*, are virtual homonyms.²⁴ That aural similarity is congruent with ancient Egyptian design tenets in which the visual representation of a head of a lioness is virtually indistinguishable from that of a cat. The presence of the mane on images of leonine goddesses is an intentional ancient Egyptian coded device to indicate that the goddess represented is a lioness and not a cat.²⁵ Those aural and visual similarities are also emphasized in any number of ancient Egyptian myths in which a raging, bellicose lioness is transformed into a purring, docile pussy cat, the best example of which is found in several versions of the so-called *Myth of the Distant Goddess*,²⁶ in which the sun god has misgivings about his decision to dispatch his enforcer, often a leonine goddess, to destroy humanity because of its alleged plot to revolt against him.²⁷ A ruse ultimately restrains the rampaging leonine goddess, who is then transformed into a docile pussy cat. This pairing of seemingly opposite, antithetical concepts is a fundamental principle of ancient Egyptian religious thought processes.²⁸

Because the sheer number of leonine goddesses populating the ancient Egyptian pantheon is legion, identifying examples that are not accompanied by inscriptions relies upon an understanding of other coded visual messages. In this case, those coded messages are contained within this goddess's attributes. Discs fronted by the hooded heads of cobras are a common attribute of ancient Egyptian deities, both gods and goddess alike, imbuing them with solar characteristics. However, the design of this particular hooded cobra is subtly different from the expected norm because its height is disproportionately larger than expected, measuring approximately the length of a radius of the circular design of the sun disc. This iconographic, coded visual message suggests that the leonine goddess represented in this bronze object possesses a second hypostasis, or alternate form, namely, that of a cobra. This observation suggests that the goddess must be identified as Wadjet,²⁹ the major leonine goddesses in the ancient Egyptian pantheon whose two principal hypostases are those of both a lioness and a cobra. That identification is confirmed by a number of iconographically similarly designed bronze statuettes, which are inscribed for that goddess. (Figure 3) A comparison with an example in Leiden confirms the identification because she is specifically identified by name in the hieroglyphic inscription on the base.³⁰ The meaning of her name, *wADj.t*, "she-of-the-papyrus," is often translated as "the green one," because of the green color of that plant.³¹

The cult of the ancient Egyptian goddess Wadjet can be traced back to the predynastic period of the fourth millennium BCE³² and was centered in the Delta city of Buto,³³ although her temple at the site of Tebtunis in the Egyptian Faiyum was the site of ritual performances in her honor.³⁴ She is often represented as a rearing cobra, as seen here in a vignette from the tomb of Nofertari where she is winged, attributes that allude to the function of her wings as a providing for a protective embrace as well as to their flapping in order to create the breath of life both of which are so vital for the survival of the deceased in the Hereafter.³⁵ (Figure 4) As such, Wadjet becomes the personification of the serpent-image of kingship and appears prominently as a royal insignia of protection on the brow of pharaohs from Dynasty IV onward. (Figure 5) Wadjet is associated with Nekhbet, the vulture goddess, forming a pair named the *nebtj*, "The-Two-Ladies," symbolizing the duality of Egypt as "The Two Lands," namely, Upper and Lower Egypt. Those symbols are often manifest in the Double Crown, the red crown of Lower Egypt represented by Wadjet, the white crown of Upper Egypt by Nekhbet.

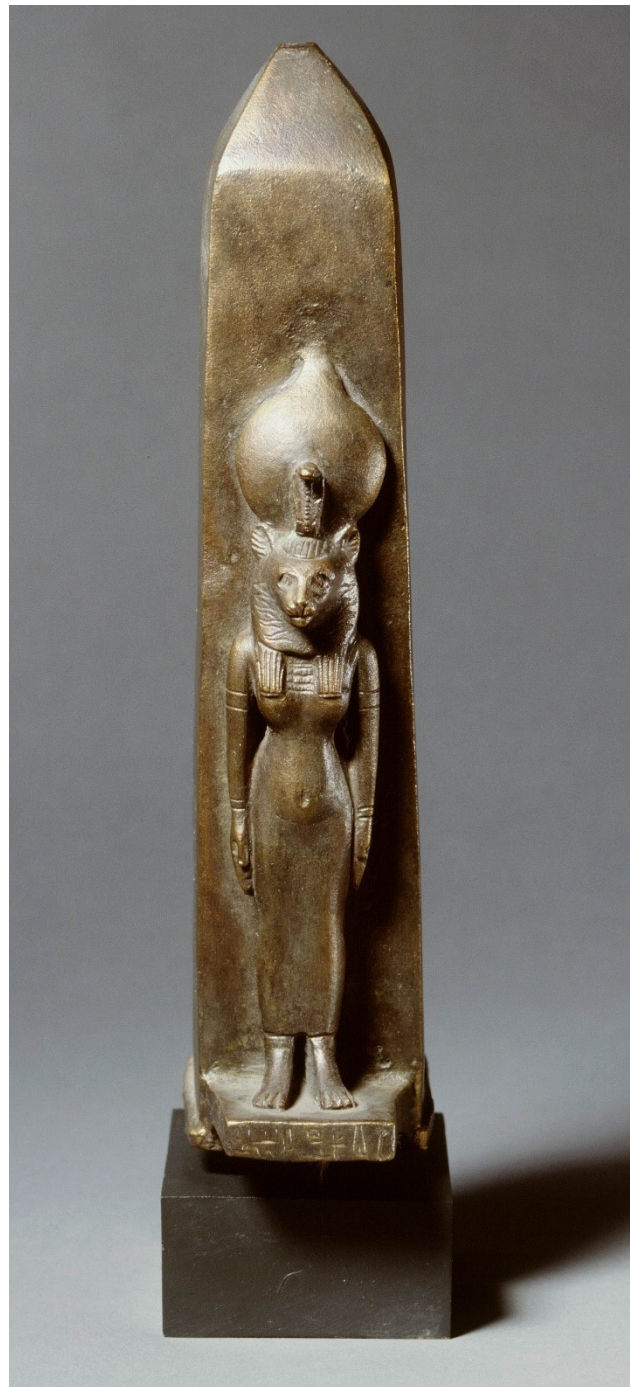


Figure 3. A bronze reliquary for an ichneumon inscribed for the Egyptian goddess Wadjet. Leiden, Rijksmuseum van Oudheden F 1953/5.2. (<https://www.rmo.nl/collectie/collectiezoeker/collectiestuk/?object=13099>, accessed on 24 September 2021) Images from the National Museum of Antiquities are freely available for re-use by developers under a Creative Commons license.



Figure 4. A painted vignette from the tomb (no. 66) of Nofertari in the Valley of the Queens identifying the cobra as the goddess Wadjet. Notice that the hieroglyphs spelling her name are painted green. Courtesy of Venerabilis Opus. http://www.venerabilisopus.org/en/images/1_4_egypt/2_19_ancient?page=2 and http://www.venerabilisopus.org/en/images/1_4_egypt/2_19_ancient?page=4 (accessed on 22 December 2021).

Wadjet symbolically protects pharaoh,³⁶ as she does Ra, the sun god, from all of their enemies. In that role, she is often called “The Mistress of the Flaming Fire” and “The Fiery [left] Eye of Ra.”³⁷ Additionally, she serves as the one who executes commands on behalf of Ra, particularly in her transformative role recounted in some versions of *Myth of the Distant Goddess*, which, as discussed earlier, recounts her emphatic transformation from a fierce, raging lioness into a docile, pussy cat. The theological roots of such transformations are inherent in the ancient Egyptian conception of *heka*, often misleadingly translated simply as “magic.” *Heka* is rather to be understood as the embodiment of the ancient Egyptian theological concept that is best understood as “the ability to change the course of nature.”³⁸ That transformative characteristic of ancient Egyptian religion extends to the principle of *alexikakos*, literally “averting evil,” by which a malevolent force is transformed into a benevolent one. A modern example of that principle is retained in the expression, “fighting fire with fire.” The ichneumon, or Egyptian mongoose, a natural predator of snakes in the marshes,³⁹ becomes the hypostasis or alternate form of Wadjet. The cobra’s natural enemy is thereby transformed into its enabling avatar.



Figure 5. The cobra goddess Wadjet and the vulture goddess, Nekhbet, titulary deities of Lower and Upper Egypt, respectively, adorning the forehead of the third coffin to Tutankhamun, Cairo, The Egyptian Museum, JE 60672. (Courtesy of ALEA—The Archive of Late Egyptian Art—a photographic and bibliographic archive maintained by Dr. Robert Steven Bianchi, Holiday, Florida, USA).

The obelisk in front of which Wadjet stands is another of the coded visual clues exhibited by this object. The ancient Egyptians considered the form of the obelisk as a representation of a ray of the sun, whereas a modern child in the West might represent the rays of the sun as a series of individual lines radiating from the circumference of a circle, the ancient Egyptians conceived the form of a sun's ray as the triangular space formed by two of those adjacent lines projecting from the sun disc. On one level, then, the obelisk visually reinforces Wadjet's relationship to Ra, the sun god. That association furthers her protective role because Wadjet is also associated with the ichneumon, named both *aD* and *xAtrw* in the ancient Egyptian language,⁴⁰ representations of which are not to be confused with seemingly similar looking mammals.⁴¹ The aggressive nature of the ichneumon⁴² is compatible with the bellicose character of Wadjet, whose role in other rituals involving protection using force is well-documented, as seen in *Ritual of the Four Balls*, which are batted away into the four geographic regions of the cosmos in order to keep malicious powers at bay.⁴³ That association must have been fairly well-known in antiquity because it finds its resonance in numerous myths in different ancient cultures, including the Classical myth involving Leto, Apollo, Artemis, and the python, as recorded in Herodotus II, 133 and 156.⁴⁴ (Figure 6) There is at least one Egyptianizing representation, namely a mosaic

from the Casa del Fauno at Pompeii which depicts “a cobra and an ichneumon facing each other in a hostile manner.”⁴⁵



Figure 6. A vignette of the confrontation between an ichneumon and a cobra from the framing element of the mosaic of Alexander the Great, Naples, National Archaeological Museum, 10020. (Courtesy of ALEA—The Archive of Late Egyptian Art—a photographic and bibliographic archive maintained by Dr. Robert Steven Bianchi, Holiday, Florida, USA).

The relationship between Wadjet and the ichneumon is, however, far more complex because of the polyvalent nature of ancient Egyptian theological exegeses. Wadjet was associated with Horus, one of whose cult centers were in the city of Letopolis, located in the Egyptian Delta. The pairing of opposite, antithetical concepts is again operative in this relationship⁴⁶ because Horus of Letopolis was thought to be sight-challenged, whereas Wadjet of Buto was not. In order to articulate that difference, the shrew mouse served as a hypostasis of Horus of Letopolis, whereas the ichneumon, known for its relatively large eyes,⁴⁷ served as that for Wadjet of Buto.⁴⁸ This light-dark dialectic⁴⁹ is furthered by the observation that in other contexts, again consistent with ancient Egyptian theological pairings, one finds Wadjet of “today” coupled with Sakhmet of “yesterday,”⁵⁰ a pairing further reinforced by the ichneumon’s association with concepts of brightness.⁵¹

It has been cogently argued that bronze statuettes representing Wadjet served as reliquaries containing the mummified remains of ichneumons, one of her hypostases. An inventory of a dozen such objects in Berlin suggests that 75% contained the remains of an ichneumon,⁵² (Figure 7) although whether that observation was based on visual or forensic evidence is unclear. Some of those reliquaries, such as the one under discussion and its parallel in Leiden, are in the form of an obelisk, which is often associated with the god Osiris who could be represented as an obelisk.⁵³ Texts associated with reliquaries from numerous animal cemeteries which dotted the Egyptian landscape during the course of the

Late Period,⁵⁴ from the seventh century BCE onwards, routinely identify the mummified animal within as Osiris.⁵⁵ Because the cult of the goddess Wadjet at Buto was associated with Osiris, the use of an obelisk as the form of the reliquary in which an ichneumon, one of her hypostases, was contained reinforces the identity of the housed ichneumon with that god. Once ensconced within the symbolic body of Osiris, represented by the obelisk, the mummified ichneumon “becomes” Osiris via the principle of assimilation.⁵⁶ Such a symbolic assimilation is again an ample demonstration of the complexities inherent in ancient Egyptian religious exegeses, which is characterized by polyvalence. These same conceits are present in a third example in Berlin inscribed as well for Wadjet.⁵⁷ In this object, Wadjet is enthroned, rather than standing, in front of the obelisk, said to contain the bones of an ichneumon, with her fistful hands placed asymmetrically on her thighs. Her attribute is a composite crown consisting of lyre-formed horns framing a sun disc and two tall plumes, which link her theologically with the goddess Hathor.⁵⁸

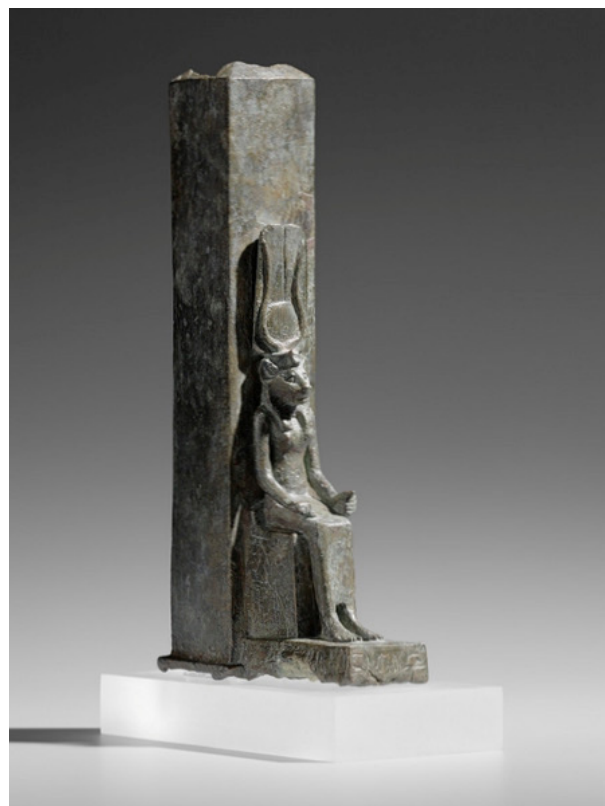


Figure 7. A bronze reliquary for an ichneumon inscribed for the Egyptian goddess Wadjet. Berlin, Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung, Staatliche Museen 13142. ©Foto: Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin Fotografien: Sandra Steiss. SMB-digital is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 Germany License.

It has been suggested that such bronze objects housing the remains of mummified animals served ancient Egyptians as either please or thank you offerings, in anticipation of an aspired benefaction or in gratitude for one having been obtained. Others take exception to this platitude by maintaining that such offerings are linked to elite religious, royal rituals of renewal and cosmic regeneration.⁵⁹ The raising of such animals, their mummification, the manufacturing of the reliquaries in which those remains were housed, and their eventual transfer to those using them in such rituals are all part of a complex, interlocking industrial system that positively impacted the economy of the nation.⁶⁰ (Figure 8).



Figure 8. A bronze reliquary for an ichneumon dedicated to the Egyptian goddess Wadjet, right side. (Private collection, courtesy of the owner).

The dating of this particular bronze object may be suggested by its stylistic characteristics. The three components elements of its composition are a leonine-headed goddess, an obelisk, and the partially preserved plinth on which the goddess strides forth with her advanced left leg. The coalescence of her wig, buttocks, and heel of her right foot against the obelisk together with the presence of the horizontal strut between the center of the sun disc upon her head and the obelisk suggests that all three elements were modeled together before the being hollow cast via the lost wax technique. The smooth surfaces of all of the incised details, which do not exhibit burrs, indicated that those details were already introduced into the wax matrix, which was enveloped before the metal was poured; they were not cold-worked after the cast was made. Although attested earlier, metal casting via the lost wax technique gained ascendancy in Egypt during the Third Intermediate Period. A majority of metal objects created during that period are of exceptionally large dimensions and are frequently inlaid with secondary materials. The dimensions of the figure of Wadjet in this object and the absence of secondary inlays would suggest that it was created during the Late Period, between the seventh and late fourth century BCE. Such a dating is reinforced by the feline design of her ears. A later date for the creation of this group into the Ptolemaic period can be excluded because ears of felines created during that era resemble human ears, often attributed to that epoch's perceived humanistic tendencies.⁶¹

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Websites: Berlin, Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung 13144: <http://www.smb-digital.de/eMuseumPlus?service=ExternalInterface&module=collection&objectId=591642&viewType=detailView> (accessed on 24 September 2021). Leiden, Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, F 1953/5.2: <https://www.rmo.nl/collectie/collectiezoeker/collectiestuk/?object=13099> (accessed on 24 September 2021). Lionesses with Manes: <https://www.newscientist.com/article/2106866-five-wild-lionesses-grow-a-mane-and-start-acting-like-males/> (accessed on 23 September 2021).

Notes

- 1 (Fischer 1986).
- 2 (Gardiner 1969, p. 31, §23) and (Goldwasser 2002).
- 3 (Shalomi-Hen 2019, p. 373) and (Richter 2019).
- 4 (Thuault 2017).
- 5 (Houston and Stauder 2020).
- 6 (Rashwan 2019, p. 166).
- 7 (Hornung 1992, pp. 30–45).
- 8 (Di Biase-Dyson 2014, p. 106).
- 9 (Cooney 2021, p. 24).
- 10 (Cauville 2007, Vol. 1, p. xvi).
- 11 (Cauville 2007, Vol. 1, p. xvi).
- 12 (Bussmann 2019).
- 13 (Broze 2006).
- 14 (*Collection de feu Omar Pacha Sultan 1929*, cat. no. 81 and p. 81), where the leonine deity is identified as “Sekhmet.” I thank the present owner for permission to publish this object and for providing me with the photographs.
- 15 (Meeks 1986).
- 16 (Dolzani 1989).
- 17 <https://www.newscientist.com/article/2106866-five-wild-lionesses-grow-a-mane-and-start-acting-like-males/> (accessed on 23 September 2021).
- 18 (Kilany and Mahran 2015).
- 19 (Evans 2010, p. 122).
- 20 (Kwiecinski 2019).
- 21 ((Bianchi forthcoming).
- 22 (Lashien 2020).
- 23 (Leitz 2018).
- 24 (Yoyotte 1988, pp. 155–78).
- 25 (Hastings 1997, p. 40).
- 26 *Inter alia*, (Inconnu-Bocquillon 2001; Richter 2010), for the polyvalence of interlocking mythologies woven into the core myth; and (Étienne 2000, pp. 25–26), for a concise summary.
- 27 (Louarn 2020), for the significance in this myth of goddesses “behaving as men,” as an expression of a breach of the normative to express “the other,” and thereby inspire fear.
- 28 (Lippert 2012), for the pairings of lions and cats.
- 29 (Vandier 1967).
- 30 Leiden, Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, F 1953/5.2: <https://www.rmo.nl/collectie/collectiezoeker/collectiestuk/?object=13099> (accessed on 24 September 2021) incorrectly identifies this image as Sakhmet, apparently ignoring the inscription on the base. That error is corrected in the catalogue entry by (Schneider and Raven 1981, pp. 134–35, no. 137).
- 31 (Desroches Noblecourt 1996); and (Di Biase-Dyson and Chantrain 2021, p. 613).
- 32 (Hartung 2018).
- 33 (Ballet 2011; Bedier 1994); and (Lloyd 1982, p. 175, note 31).
- 34 (Töpfer 2018).
- 35 (Gamelin 2021, p. 68).
- 36 (Bosse-Griffiths 1973).
- 37 (Étienne 2000, pp. 25–26); and (Szapkowska 2011, pp. 70–1); and (Shaw and Nicholson 1995)
- 38 (Jacco 2019, p. 96).

- 39 (Vernus and Yoyotte 2005, p. 266 [Loutre]).
- 40 (Leitz 2018, p. 249).
- 41 (Evans 2010); and (Evans 2016).
- 42 (Brentjes 1967).
- 43 (Ziegler 1979; Coulon 2011); and (Étienne 2000, pp. 36–9).
- 44 (Fischer-Elfret 1986, col. 907; Delhez 2013); and (Brunner-Traut 1980, col. 122), suggesting a link between “Leto” and “Uto,” an alternate reading of one of the names of Wadjet.
- 45 Pompeii Regio VI.12.2, one of the framing elements of the mosaic depicting a battle between Alexander the Great and his Persian adversary, Naples, The National Archaeological Museum, 9990: (Versluys 2002, pp. 267–68); *Il Museo archeologico nazionale* 1984, 46 [upper left-hand corner].
- 46 (Lippert 2012), for the pairing of the shrew mouse and ichneumon.
- 47 (Brunner-Traut 1980, col. 122).
- 48 (Fischer-Elfret 1986).
- 49 (Di Biase-Dyson and Chantrain 2021, pp. 613–15).
- 50 (James 1982, p. 158).
- 51 (Vadas 2020, p. 96); and (Graindorge 1996).
- 52 (Bothmer 1949).
- 53 (Bell 2002, pp. 33–35 and 37).
- 54 (Davies 2007).
- 55 (Rowland et al. 2013).
- 56 (Kurth 1990, pp. 11 and 63–67); and (Velde 1980, p. 81).
- 57 Berlin, Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung 13144: <http://www.smb-digital.de/eMuseumPlus?service=ExternalInterface&module=collection&objectId=591642&viewType=detailView> (accessed on 24 September 2021); (Roeder 1956, Volume 1: 291,f and 2: plate 42,2) and (Bothmer 1949).
- 58 (Fischer-Elfret 1986, pp. 907–8); and (Sweeney et al. 2018).
- 59 (Kessler 2005).
- 60 (Ikram 2015); and (Flossmann-Schütze 2017).
- 61 (Sainte Fare Garnot 1937, p. 89 with note 2).

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