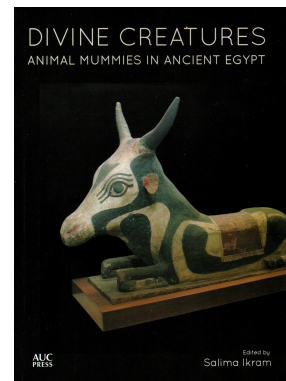


## Birmingham Egyptology

Review by Steven R. W. Gregory

S. Ikram (editor). *Divine Creatures: Animal Mummies in Ancient Egypt*. The American University in Cairo Press: Cairo. 2015. ISBN 9789774166969. Paperback £16.95. xxi + 274 pages, 93 black and white illustrations, and 24 colour plates.



In the preface to this volume its editor, Selima Ikram, suggests that the book will present the reader with ‘an introduction to the range of animal mummies found in Egypt’; ‘discussions of the different reasons behind the phenomenon’; and ‘a survey of the methods of mummification’. Further, the book includes essays which relate to specific animals and sites where their mummified remains are found, covering in all a ‘wide range of topics, sites, and species’ relating to animal mummification [p. xvi]. And, to a large extent, those promises are fulfilled. Nonetheless, as may be anticipated in a volume of essays, some sections offer more rewarding reading than others.

Three of the essays are authored by Ikram herself, including the opening contributions, ‘Divine Creatures: Animal Mummies’ and ‘Manufacturing Divinity: The Technology of Mummification’. In these essays Ikram presents a broad range of information which gives a sound introduction to the subjects to be covered in the remainder of the book. Of particular interest here is the section describing recent practical experimentation of the mummification process [pp. 30-43], from which some understanding of the practice in ancient times may be gleaned.

It is notable, however, that the material presented may have benefitted from a little more attention to the structure of its arguments; as it stands, it often seems a rather haphazard collection of information. Moreover, some passages seem to lack clarity: for example, in discussion relating to the diversification of animal types mummified in later periods [p. 13] there is mention of the ‘two birds’ representative of the composite deity, Har-Thoth. Presumably these birds were the falcon and the ibis, but this is not stated specifically – an oversight which ought to have been avoided in a general background work of this nature which, as seems likely, might be of most interest to the neophyte. Particularly irritating is that everyone involved in the rearing, supply, embalming, and

internment of animals seems to have been a ‘priest’ of one kind or another. Such matters are, however, no more than a minor distraction in what is otherwise a satisfactory and informative overview of the types of animals preserved, and the techniques involved in their mummification.

Paul Nicholson’s contribution, ‘The Sacred Animal Necropolis at North Saqqara’, has rather more archaeological emphasis. Initial discussion relates to the development of the various animal cults over time, in particular that of the Apis Bull but also those surrounding baboons, ibis, falcons, dogs, and cats. Some attention is also given to the evolution of the Serapeum itself before the focus switches to the rediscovery of the animal burials from the seventeenth century AD onwards: a process more latterly related to the search for the tomb of Imhotep by Emery in the 1960s. This fascinating tale of archaeological discovery is followed by detailed discussion of the construction of the Saqqara catacombs, as may be ascertained from the surviving archaeological evidence. Background information relating to the mythology and practices surrounding the various animal cults is also provided, and here it is comforting to note that while the activities of ‘priests’ are mentioned, Nicholson populates history with a wider range of participants including mourners, recluses, masons, vendors of votive items, potters, and specialist embalmers [pp. 49-50]. This presents a more realistic demographic than that suggested by Ikram’s characterization in the earlier chapters.

Aidan Dodson authors ‘Bull Cults’, a chapter beginning with comprehensive descriptions of the surviving archaeological remains from the earliest known Apis burials of the Eighteenth Dynasty until the abandonment of the Serapeum following the Roman conquest. He deals with each subsequent Apis internment in chronological order, while outlining the concomitant extensions to the Serapeum. Reference is also made to the associated cult of the Mother of Apis burials in the nearby Iseum, before turning his attention to further chronologically focussed discussions of the – perhaps less well archaeologically attested – Heliopolitan cult of the Mnevis Bull; the Upper Egyptian cult of the Buchis Bull of Armant; and finally, the Mothers of the Buchis Bulls.

The papers forming the central section of the volume are perhaps not the most engaging. Zivie and Lichtenberg write a relatively short essay entitled ‘The Cats of the Goddess Bastet’ wherein, after opening remarks about cat necropoleis more generally, the authors present a somewhat unstructured account of the material remains associated with the Bubasteion at Saqqara. While perhaps not the most informative essay in the volume it is, nonetheless, likely of some value to those with particular interest in mummified feline remains.

The following work, ‘Tuna al-Gebel: Millions of Ibises and Other Animals’, is particularly disappointing. Authored by Dieter Kessler and Abdel Halim Nur el-Din, the paper is seemingly centred on discussion of ibis and baboon burials associated with the god Thoth. While it has to be admitted that it does contain some useful information concerning the particular site in question, it is not well written, and appears to lack the necessary academic rigour which may have justified its inclusion in this volume. In general, the essay gives a quite superficial treatment of its subject and often lacks any clear structure, with many aspects being poorly explained. Moreover, with much use of speculation and unsupported assertion, the piece is quite openly reliant upon its authors’ imaginations – without which some sections would contain little information at all. The constant use of uninformative adjectives is a clear artifice: ‘sacred’ and ‘secret’ appear frequently; ‘special’ is particularly overused in a work demonstrating little to which such a descriptor may appropriately be applied. Thus, while description of the physical remains may be of some value, the interpretation of that material, particularly as it is related to ancient mythological concepts, is often questionable.

‘The Cult and Necropolis of the Sacred Ram at Mendes’ is discussed in the essay authored by Susan Redford and Donald Redford. In contrast to the preceding article, this piece offers some intelligible explanation of the underlying principles of the cults which is well supported by both primary and secondary textual sources in a well-composed account. The descriptions of the pertinent archaeological remains and historical narratives of relevant periods are no less

informative. However, this is followed by a relatively short contribution from Edda Bresciani entitled 'Sobek, Lord of the Land of the Lake' wherein, once again, a somewhat haphazard style of writing with, on occasion, some rather vague or imprecise expression is apparent. That said, careful reading reveals ample information relating to crocodile cults.

The main body of the work is closed by Ikram's third contribution, 'Protecting Pets and Cleaning Crocodiles'; an essay primarily concerned with the author's study of animal mummies in the Cairo Museum. This includes a number of case studies which are particularly informative in relation to the mummification processes. Ikram closes with a useful 'Postscript to the 2015 Edition' which outlines the perceived increase in interest in the topic since the book was first published in 2005, giving details of a variety of related research projects and publications, and outlining advances in the technology now available to those working in the field.

In summary, it has to be accepted that there have been some modifications to the original work first published in 2005, mainly, it seems, with respect to the profiles of the various contributors, and with the addition of the editor's postscript. But essentially the work appears to be little more than a reprint of the earlier edition. Therefore one cannot help feeling that the editor has missed an opportunity to carry out the careful proofreading and copy-editing which may – and certainly so from the reader's perspective – have been beneficial. Nonetheless, one can only assess the final product, some of which is most commendable.

It is certainly the case that the volume is packed with information on the extant archaeology relating to the various animal cults. There is a useful list of selected animal cemeteries supported by a related map of pertinent sites; the book is generally well referenced, with ample use of primary source material, and contains an extensive bibliography. The images are often of reasonable quality and give appropriate support to the text, although it has to be said that some – particularly the black and white reproductions – are rather small and somewhat lacking in definition, but nonetheless serve to illustrate the points being made. Perhaps a final consideration, albeit not an insignificant point, is price. Here it seems that, for those with an interest in the practice of animal mummification in ancient Egypt, the book may well be worthy of such a moderate investment.