

# Religious Practice and Cultural Construction of Animal Worship in Egypt from the Early Dynastic to the New Kingdom

Ritual forms, material display,  
historical development

Angelo Colonna



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## Preface and Acknowledgements

The present study is a largely revised version of a doctoral thesis in Egyptology defended in September 2014 at Sapienza University of Rome, entitled ‘Panthe(ri)on: costruzione culturale e sviluppo del culto degli animali. Messa in prospettiva di un motivo costante della pratica religiosa egiziana’. The general ideas underlying that work were briefly presented at the 11th International Congress of Egyptologists, held in Florence in 2015 (Colonna 2017).

Since then, I have had the opportunity to refine the theoretical framework of the research while, for practical and methodological reasons that will be explained later on, I decided to limit its chronological scope to the period until the New Kingdom. The following analysis, therefore, does not provide a narrowly focused presentation of individual cases of so-called ‘animal worship’ nor a general description of the phenomenon at the peak of its development – the Late and Graeco-Roman times – since several such accounts are already available. Instead, it draws on earlier material and comparison with later data to theorise – i.e., to reflect theoretically on – ‘animal worship’, producing a historical-conceptual model that challenges traditional narratives and literary perspectives. The result will be, as with every model, not much a mirror-image as an interpretive framework of patterned data.

In brief, the present study can be read and considered as an essay, an attempt to improve the object of its inquiry by defending the thesis that ‘animal worship’ is better understood as a field of religious practice and display with a historically significant range of distinctive configurations. The notion itself of ‘animal worship’ is methodologically problematised as the historical product of our humanistic tradition, which can be maintained as a traditional label – it is regularly and purposely put between quotation marks throughout this study to highlight its conventional use – posited that the definition of its content is refined and its heuristic function as an operative tool is re-established.

The research, therefore, has the character of a conceptual design and of historical analysis, the articulation of which includes three main parts. The first one (Chapter 1) formulates the core problem – how we can construct a critical understanding of Egyptian ‘animal worship’ and its evidence –, tracing the origins and changes in the use of the category, reviewing the basic tenets of what is here presented as the ‘Standard Model’ of Egyptological interpretation, and expanding discussion on theoretical and methodological grounds.

A second section (Chapters 2-5) is dedicated to collecting and exploring relevant archaeological and textual materials. In seeking to demonstrate the variability and diachronic development of practices of ‘animal worship’ the work of analysis is limited to the sources from the Early Dynastic to the New Kingdom, which are often neglected or only touched upon as antecedents of later manifestations.

The final part (Chapter 6) develops a synthesis that aims at reassessing Egyptian ‘animal worship’ in relation to the three fundamental aspects of religious practice, monumental display and historical change. By combining an etic (analytical) perspective with a focused examination of the emic expressions attested in the sources, the debated topic of the religious status and meaning ascribed to certain animals (both individuals and groups) is addressed. Particular attention is paid to the Egyptian conceptual strategies and responses to that issue. Likewise, considerations of display and decorum – i.e., exploring the modes and times according to which practices of ‘animal worship’ are integrated within the forms of Egyptian ‘monumental discourse’ (*sensu* Jan Assmann) – provide important caveats in the construction of an ‘Alternative Model’ for interpreting patterns and gaps in the distribution of the evidence, thus producing a more nuanced historical reconstruction.

Thinking, imagining, writing a book are part of an individual, lone enterprise and any omissions or mistakes are my full responsibility. At the same time, the creative, material, even emotional process behind it does not occur in a void, profiting instead from a beneficial series of exchanges and opportunities. So, I cannot but acknowledge the generous intellectual and practical help of various people and institutions.

First of all, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Paola Buzi (Rome) for her positive interest, inexhaustible support, and continuous encouragement in every stage of my research and career. I am also grateful to other friends and colleagues, with whom I had the chance to share some of the problems and ideas this book is about, and who contributed many stimulating suggestions on various formal and informal occasions: John Baines (Oxford), Emanuele Ciampini (Venice), Francesca Iannarilli (Venice), Martin Fitzenreiter (Bonn), Joachim Quack (Heidelberg). Their comments and feedback, as well as their own works and academic interests, have inspired and enriched my research in multiple and sometimes unexpected ways.

I owe special thanks to Francesca Iannarilli for the drawing and elaboration of many pictures as well as for the tedious time she spent reading the whole text. Her help was also crucial in writing down the final index.

The Library of the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome and the Sackler Library at the University of Oxford provided the best environment to carry on my research, and their personnel always offered their kind assistance on every matter.

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A wor(l)d of love and personal gratitude is due to my family, for always being present and strong even when I was wandering in the troubling wilderness of my thoughts. After all, ‘Home is where one starts from’.

And speaking of home, I would like to make a memory into a wish and offer it to MPI who, I hope, will not stop wondering ‘where do the ducks go when the pond freezes over’.

*To those who stand, sleep, and settle near*

*Tiger Tiger, burning bright,  
In the forests of the night;  
What immortal hand or eye,  
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?*

*William Blake, The Tiger (1794)*

## Abbreviations

AEIN	Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen
Ael., NA	Aelianus, <i>De Natura Animalium</i>
Ael., VH	Aelianus, <i>Varia Historia</i>
Ael., Fr.	Aelianus, Fragments
AGÉA	<i>Anthroponymes et Généalogies de l'Égypte Ancienne</i> ( <a href="https://www.ifao.egnet.net/bases/agea/noms/">https://www.ifao.egnet.net/bases/agea/noms/</a> )
ÄM	Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung, Berlin
Arr., <i>Anab.</i>	Arrian, <i>Anabasis</i>
Ashmolean	Ashmolean Museum
BD	Book of the Dead (after Allen 1974)
BM	British Museum, London
CG	Catalogue General, Cairo Egyptian Museum
CF	Cairo Fragment(s) (after Wilkinson 2000)
Cic., <i>Nat. D.</i>	Cicero, <i>De natura deorum</i>
CT	Coffin Texts (after de Buck 1835-1961)
Diod.	Diodorus Siculus
Hdt.	Herodotus
Juv., <i>Sat.</i>	Juvenal, <i>Saturae</i>
JE	Journel d'entrée, Cairo Egyptian Museum
Kelsey Museum	Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, Ann Arbor
Kestner Museum	Museum August Kestner
KRI	Kitchen, K.A. 1975-1990. <i>Ramesside Inscriptions: Historical and Biographical</i> , 8 vols. Oxford: B.H. Blackwell
Louvre	Musée du Louvre
MFA	Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
MMA	Metropolitan Museum of Arts, New York
OI	Oriental Institute of Chicago
Plin., NH	Plinius, <i>Naturalis Historia</i>
Plut., <i>De Is. et Os.</i>	Plutarch, <i>De Iside et Osiride</i>
PM	Porter, B. and R.L.B. Moss (eds) 1927-2007. <i>Topographical Bibliography of Ancient Egyptian Hieroglyphic Texts, Reliefs, and Paintings</i> , 8 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press
Porph., <i>Abst.</i>	Porphyry, <i>De abstinentia</i>
PS	Palermo Stone (after Wilkinson 2000)
PT	Pyramid Text (spell) (after Sethe 1908-1922)
Pyr.	Pyramid Texts (utterance) (after Sethe 1908-1922)
Pushkin Museum	Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts
RMO	Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, Leiden
SMÄK	Staatliche Museum Ägyptischer Kunst, Munich
Strabo, <i>Geog.</i>	Strabo, <i>Geography</i>
UCL	University College London
Urk.	<i>Urkunden des ägyptischen Altertums</i> , 8 vols ed. K. Sethe, H.W. Helck, H. Schäfer, H. Grapow, O. Firchow, 1903-1957 (Leipzig/Berlin)
Virg., <i>Aen.</i>	Virgil, <i>Aeneis</i>
WAM	Walter Art Museum, Baltimore
Wb.	Erman, A. and W. Grapow 1926-1961. <i>Wörterbuch der ägyptischen Sprache</i> , 7 vols. Leipzig – Berlin.



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# Chapter 1

## Introducing Animal Worship

In 1886, at the Royal Academy in London, the British painter and illustrator John Reinhard Weguelin showed *The Obsequies of an Egyptian Cat*. The painting illustrates the funerary rites ('obsequies') performed by a priestess for a deceased, mummified cat. The mummy is set, in the guise of an idol, within a shrine placed upon an altar, before which the female celebrant kneels in adoration, burning incense and presenting food offerings that even include a plate of milk. The walls behind the priestess are decorated with delicate Egyptian frescoes, and a large statue of an enthroned lion-goddess Sekhmet stands at the end of a descending staircase and guards the entrance to the room, all elements that create a fitting ceremonial context for the main action of the scene.

The work belongs to the well-established genre of the archaeological painting so typical of the Victorian age, for which ancient Egypt represented a primary source of inspiration, stimulating a whole series of Egyptian paintings by some of the leading artists of the time, who engaged with the past and with archaeology 'as a source of "visual poetry"'.<sup>1</sup> In particular, Weguelin's *Obsequies of an Egyptian Cat*, in the words of Stephanie Moser, 'is reminiscent of Alma-Tadema's and Poynter's Egyptian pictures of the 1860s and 1870s, where religious rituals took place in small intimate spaces'.<sup>2</sup>

Literary inspiration likely came from Herodotus, who described the revered status of the Egyptian cats, amongst other sacred animals, and noted the honours and the special attentions they received (in life and death) at his times.<sup>3</sup> In addition, the scene combines highly detailed archaeological references – one might only incidentally note precise citations of Egyptian monuments displayed at the British Museum, including a fragment of the wall decoration from the Theban tomb of Nebamun (EA 37978), a New Kingdom statue of Sekhmet (EA 37, 63), and one of the many late cat mummies (like EA 6752) – with imaginative inference, presenting a fascinating interpretation of an ancient Egyptian ceremony. No less significantly, the picture displays a 'playful mixture of the familiar and the bizarre. The scene reminds viewers of the human fondness for domestic animals that might link us to the ancient Egyptians, but also of difference: the female figure kneels in worship as she performs the rites due to the cat, regarded as a deity in Egyptian religion'.<sup>4</sup> Like other similar compositions,<sup>5</sup> it was an educated, picturesque, and ironic statement on ancient rituals, at the same time arousing curiosity toward their decadent exoticism and remarking distance from their trivial character. The central act of venerating a dead animal, overemphasised by the ample gestures of the female figure, surely hit the point. It is noteworthy that, in turning on the religious theme, the significant role of animals was selected as representative of Egyptian paganism and, through the artistic citation, recreated as part of a (once) lived practice that could be enjoyed by the modern spectator in vivid details.

### 1.1 Animal worship and ancient Egyptian religion: articulation of the problem

The brief overview on Weguelin's painting helps introduce the basic problem of so-called 'animal worship' in ancient Egypt. To put it with the words of Martin Fitzenreiter, 'Die ägyptischen Tierkulte leiden unter einem Paradoxon. Während sie in der Ägyptologie als ein Grenzgebiet religiöser Praxis angesehen und eher gemieden werden, gelten sie im allgemeinen Bewußtsein (nennen

<sup>1</sup> Moser 2020: 173.

<sup>2</sup> Moser 2020: 258.

<sup>3</sup> Hdt. II. 66-67.

<sup>4</sup> Trumble 2001: 88.

<sup>5</sup> Edwin Long's *Sacred to Pasht* (1886) exploits the same 'feline' theme while Edward Poynter's *Feeding the Sacred Ibis* (1871) focuses on another well-known sacred animal. Moser 2020: 178-181, 258-261.

wir es mit Aleida und Jan Assman gern das “kulturelle Gedächtnis”) als ein wesentliches Merkmal altägyptischer Religion, ja Altägyptens überhaupt’.<sup>6</sup> The point might be articulated differently: the notion that animals played a religiously significant role for the Egyptians is something that predates the birth of Egyptology as a discipline and that has long been acquired as a rock-solid matter of fact. The picture just described captures this aspect with inspired creativity but sits at the extremity – and not even at the farthest end – of a chain of transmission that reaches back to the Classical Antiquity. So, while it is easily recognised that animals are a recurrent presence in the mythical, symbolical, and ritual constructions of ancient societies, providing an effective medium to read and establish connections between the human and the divine worlds, ancient Egypt stands out inasmuch as there the association animal-god produces very distinctive and substantial configurations. It actually concerns, to use the well-known distinction posed by Philippe Derchain, both levels of *réel* and *imaginaire*,<sup>7</sup> meaning that such a ‘animalité des dieux’<sup>8</sup> affects and permeates the religious practice as much as the creation of a sophisticated imagery.

In Egyptology, however, while the visual, emblematic, and symbolic value of animals in the characterisation of the figure and role of divine beings represents a well-established focus of study, ‘animal worship’ or ‘die Verehrung des Tieres als Gottes’, according to the influential definition of Sigfried Morenz,<sup>9</sup> reveals major shortcomings in terms of methodological approach and historical understanding. Traditionally, discussion proceeds from the perspective of Classical literary narratives or focuses on cases and contexts from the best represented Late Period of Egyptian history. Earlier periods are rarely taken into consideration and theoretical issues are not properly addressed, thus reinforcing the perception of the phenomenon as a late eccentric aspect of the great pharaonic civilisation. In the following analysis, it will be shown that, in what can be labelled as the ‘Standard Model’ of Egyptological interpretation (*infra*), the commanding influence of the Classical and Biblical tradition and the prevailing textual/discursive orientation of research outline and underpin an interpretive strategy that pushes ‘animal worship’ at the margin (*Grenzgebiet*) of the general reconstruction of the ancient Egyptian religion, where it can only be brought in a *latere*, as a symbolic, metaphoric reference (zoomorphism; animal iconicity) to the higher nature of the gods, and as a mark of religious decline (mass animal burials) in the final stage of Egyptian civilisation.

## 1.2 Thesis, goals, and limitations of the present study

The present study investigates forms and configurations of so-called Egyptian ‘animal worship’ from the Early Dynastic to the New Kingdom (3rd-2nd millennia BC), using the material reviewed from these periods to test and substantiate a theoretical and historiographic model that challenges traditional understanding, reassess the terms of discussion and data analysis, and prospects an alternative line of historical-religious interpretation. The core idea is that ‘animal worship’ should no longer be viewed, simplistically, as a late phenomenon, marking the end of the pharaonic religious tradition at the time of its (alleged) decline – though, of course, it becomes a distinctive phenomenon of Egyptian religion of Late and Graeco-Roman periods. Rather, it must be positively and explicitly reconfigured as a complex and historically articulated domain of religious practice, with a wider range of expressions and a broader chronological scope than usually acknowledged.<sup>10</sup> To this end, earlier attestations will be first surveyed and discussed, and then interpreted as referring to larger historical patterns of cultural-religious activity.

The driving intention of the research is to theorise Egyptian ‘animal worship’, an endeavour that is here intended as concerned with the definition of a theoretical approach which, drawing on

<sup>6</sup>Fitzenreiter 2003a:1.

<sup>7</sup>Derchain 1981: 325.

<sup>8</sup>Meeks 1986: 171

<sup>9</sup>Morenz 1962a: 896.

<sup>10</sup>Colonna 2014a; 2017; 2018.

multiple perspectives and concepts (from History of religions, Anthropology, and Egyptology itself), aims at problematising the subject, and so at reconceptualising the scholarly discourse around it. In brief, this work will design an interpretive (etic) framework within which relevant evidence can be analysed and related to a broader context of religious action and display, and to specific issues of categorisation and historical development, while ancient Egyptian views and attitudes can be assessed against this background to provide it with emic content and meaning. The model will address three main goals that can be summarised as follows:

1. Conceptualisation, which is concerned with (a) the reassessment of the notion of ‘animal worship’ as an effective analytic category, reviewing the history of its formation and use in Egyptology, and identifying practice as a focal point in interpretation; (b) the reappraisal of the critical question about the religious status of the engaged animal agencies, exploring modern classifications and ancient terminology. By contextualising patterns of use of Egyptian predications, and focusing on the strategical manipulation of those animals – what is done to/with them – ritual action is brought at the foreground as a salient defining factor of animals’ sacredness, and accordingly a suitable formal categorisation is established.
2. Periodisation, which focuses on modelling patterns and gaps in the distribution of textual and material sources documenting practices of ‘animal worship’ in order to identify significant configurations that can be (a) discussed synchronically, to expand our understanding of the contexts of practical construction of a meaningful animal presence and of its integration within contemporary society, and (b) arranged diachronically, to chart major continuities and changes over the course of time.
3. Historical interpretation, which has to do with the replacement of traditional linear narratives, too often biased by theological/teleological perspectives, with a historiographic scenario that (a) matches the current situation of our evidence, not ignoring its sparse character and uneven distribution but prospecting a plausible articulated picture for explaining that situation, and (b) relocates ‘animal worship’ as practice within the frame of Egyptian religious tradition and system of decorum.

Overall, the study is designed as a research that operates at the macro-level. It is not much concerned with the analysis of specific case studies (individual animal figures or archaeological context) as with proposing a perspective of synthesis that is both conceptual and historical. It argues that practices of ‘animal worship’ can be posited for earlier times, though focus may be different from later periods. Moreover, the evidence appears fragmentary and less clear than it is for later periods and tends to be underrated in scholarship. Accordingly, the work will proceed at a survey of pertinent early material as well as at the construction of a framework within which that material can be evaluated, contrasted, and combined with later evidence into a meaningful reconstruction. Such a reconstruction however is not intended as a univocal description, even less as a full narrative, but rather as an attempt to represent (by formulating hypotheses and modelling the primary sources) an admittedly complex documentary situation, and to restore both religious and historical articulation to a wide arena of practice that was evidently addressed and variously integrated within ancient Egyptian society.

While acknowledging the diachronic character of ‘animal worship’, the chronological focus of the study has been restricted to the periods from the Early Dynastic to the New Kingdom. This restriction, which excludes from the surveyed material both some poorly attested predynastic contexts and the better-known configurations of the Late and Graeco-Roman times, is motivated by practical and methodological reasons. First of all, a full examination of such a vast amount of evidence does not fit the structure and overall intention of the work, as its review would have required a different approach and, most importantly, a coral effort. Secondly, these periods have been (and still are) made the object of detailed studies that provide in-depth insights and valuable discussions. For the Predynastic, the research of Diane Flores on relevant sites with animal burials has reassessed their cultural-religious significance, questioning the traditional assumption that



they attest ‘a cult of sacred animals or of divine powers in animal forms’.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, animal cults during the Late and Graeco-Roman periods represent an established and prolific field of research, with important works of synthesis that have been produced.<sup>12</sup> This set of information, therefore, will be more easily referred to and variously brought into discussion, without needing any preliminary presentation. Instead, and that is the final point, ‘animal worship’ is not usually integrated within the reconstructed religious scenario of the 3rd and 2nd millennia BC, despite some positive attestations are generally admitted in this regard (e.g., the range of bull figures and cults). The paucity of evidence is usually taken at face value and quickly explained by assuming a linear development according to which archaic forms of religiosity became gradually superseded by higher beliefs and kept at the margin of official religion. Here, it is suggested that the distribution is meaningful and that the apparent gap can be differently interpreted, suggesting a more fitting context for both early evidence and the practices they refer to. The alternative proposed will be developed in the following analysis. It will reveal, to a certain extent, a hypothetical character, yet it has the crucial advantage of not considering the available hints as isolated and disconnected from the living society. Rather, as John Baines aptly remarks, ‘hypotheses provide the context for detailed research’ and ‘[o]dd hints of religious practice may help to illuminate gaps in knowledge and to formulate more general models of the context into which such evidence can be fitted’.<sup>13</sup>

### 1.3 History of research and *status quaestionis*

Outlining a history of past scholarship on ‘animal worship’ is not an easy task because, as it has become clear from the foregoing considerations, it has to do with an aspect that is deeply entangled with the cultural-historical process that shaped our Western perception of ancient Egypt, at least until the decipherment of hieroglyphs and the first successful archaeological enterprises of the new-born Egyptology did replace the ‘hot’ link of memory with the ‘cold’ rigour of modern scientific analysis. Jan Assmann has justly noted how Egypt had long ‘formed part of our own past’ but ‘[a]s the newly emergent science of Egyptology gradually discovered ancient Egypt, Egypt itself disappeared from the general culture of the West’.<sup>14</sup>

In both cases (Egypt as an object of memory and Egypt as an object of study), the Classical and Biblical texts represented the *fil rouge* that maintained the link with the culture of pharaonic Egypt, and defined the horizon – first of memory then of research – wherein that culture was retrieved and approached. In this perspective, the role of ‘animal worship’ as a recurrent thematic focus within the Classical and Biblical literary tradition, widely exploited for the construction of a rhetorical debate on identity and otherness, can hardly be ignored, at least for the long-lived consequences it generated.

#### 1.3.1 *The memory-horizon: the role of literary tradition*

In the modern approach to ‘animal worship’, as well as to other aspects of the Egyptian culture, Classical sources have always granted Egyptology with a privileged point of view, though, of course, motivated by different interests and purposes. So, those earliest studies, which collected and commented upon Classical and Jewish/Christian texts as primary and valuable support to the understanding of the phenomenon, have been progressively overlapped and superseded by researches that are more concerned with evaluating how such a specific Egyptian religious element was received and perceived by contemporary Greek, Roman, Jewish and early Christian authors, impacting on the conception of Egypt as a whole during Classical and Late Antiquity.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Hornung 1982a: 101.

<sup>12</sup> The work of reference is of course Kessler 1989. A full dissertation on the topic also in Charron 1996a (summarised in Charron 1996b). For an informed overview, with a collection of major case studies, see Ikram 2005.

<sup>13</sup> Baines 1987: 79.

<sup>14</sup> Assmann 2006: 180, 188.

<sup>15</sup> The standard work is Smelik and Hemelrijk 1984, which aims to ‘investigate the conception non-Egyptian had of this part of the Egyptian religion related to their view of Egypt in general’ (Smelik and Hemelrijk 1984: 1855). The two authors especially focus on



From Herodotus (5th century BC) to Late Antique writers (3th-5th century AD), sacred animals are a regular *topos* in the contemporary discourses on the ancient Egyptian religion.<sup>16</sup> As early as the renowned account of the *pater historiae*, those positive themes concurring to a characterisation of Egypt as a fabulous land (venerable antiquity; vast knowledge; great religiosity)<sup>17</sup> are countered by ‘animal worship’ as a disturbing motive. The numerous and variegated explanations flourishing in ancient literature represent, in a way, the history of such background noise.

Modern scholarship usually concludes that, despite the enormous interest they raised, ‘[t]he complexity of Egyptian animal cults escaped the Greco-Roman critics’.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, the remark of Fitzenreiter – ‘die Beobachtungen der antiken Autoren, sofern sie sich auf primäre Quellen stützen (und davon ist in tatsächlich den meisten Fällen auszugehen), durchaus den Wert ethnographischer Primärquellen haben und daher äußerst hilfreich sind, um ein Bild der ägyptischen Religion und Religiosität zu gewinnen’ – invites us to a more balanced assessment of the informative value of these sources.<sup>19</sup>

Without dwelling on this, it suffices here to highlight two basic and complementary points for discussion. First of all, ancient Greek and Roman authors were more or less contemporaries of the phenomenon they described, and so had the chance to grasp (when they did not have direct experience) some of its vivid expressions (like mummies and burial practices) at the time of its largest proliferation (Late and Graeco-Roman periods).<sup>20</sup> Moreover, these first attempts to explain the sacrality of certain animals did not happen in a conceptual vacuum but confronted in some way with the Egyptian speculations. At least since the New Kingdom, the Egyptians themselves had developed a sophisticated interpretation that made use of specific forms of predications (*b3*, ‘manifestation’; *whm*, ‘herald’) to express the status of sacred animals and their relationship to the great gods (*infra*, Chap. 6). It appears that such notions, with all the possible limits of translation and understanding, found a correspondence with or even inspired certain approaches, like the symbolic explanation of Plutarch and other Neoplatonic authors.<sup>21</sup>

Secondly, one should not ignore that those authors were indeed outsiders and came from a very different cultural background, so their statements inevitably reflect the categories and beliefs of that context.<sup>22</sup> In addition, being literary pieces, the opinions expressed in them were understandably conditioned by the expectations of their homeland’s audience, which of course shared the same values, or by specific ideological purposes. Thus, despite the undeniably positive data that Classical sources provide and the possibility of a confirmation from the Egyptian documentation (both textual and archaeological), the interpretations on ‘animal worship’ they promulgate are however more informative on the mentality and attitude of the Greek and Roman observers than on the actual significance of those practices for the Egyptian actors.

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strategies of ‘conceptualisation’, intended as a group of ‘generalizations, stereotypes and conceptions to create a degree of order in our perception of reality’ (Smelik and Hemelrijk 1984: 1856). Stereotypes ‘belong to an inherited set of cultural norms’ (*ibid.*) and ‘are not the product of purposive thinking, but (...) irrational and non-verifiable opinions which have been adopted by the group because of their tried practicability’ (Smelik and Hemelrijk 1984: 1856). When applied to the interaction between different nations or cultural groups ‘it [conceptualisation] reaffirms a nation’s own identity as a culture by contrasting their conception about themselves with that about other peoples’ (Smelik and Hemelrijk 1984: 1856).

<sup>16</sup> Feder 2003: 159–65; Hopfner 1913; Pfeiffer 2008: 363–83; Smelik and Hemelrijk 1984: 1852–2000. See also Colonna 2014.

<sup>17</sup> Hdt. II, 2 (antiquity); II, 77, 160 (wisdom); II, 36, 65 (religious devotion).

<sup>18</sup> Thompson 2001: 331. Similar considerations are expressed by Smelik and Hemelrijk 1984, 1997: ‘For it is very remarkable that the interest in Egyptian animal worship did not lead to a real understanding of this part of the Egyptian religion’.

<sup>19</sup> Fitzenreiter 2003a: 9.

<sup>20</sup> Feder 2003: 159.

<sup>21</sup> In Plut., *De Is. et Os.* 20 (359 B), 43 (368 C), for example, the Apis bull is described as ‘image of the soul of Osiris’ and ‘living image of Osiris’, with a meaningful use of the word *eidolon*. For discussion on Plutarch’s interpretation of ‘animal worship’, cf. Smelik and Hemelrijk 1984: 1961–1965. They also consider that the opinion of Porphiry on sacred animals as well as on the mixed form of the Egyptian gods (especially in Porph., *Abst.* IV, 9) ‘comes closest to the essence of Egyptian animal worship’; Smelik and Hemelrijk 1984: 1961–1965.

<sup>22</sup> A major difference, in this regard, seems to concern the general understanding of the animal realm and of the man-animal relationship. The Egyptian Weltanschauung regard that relationship in terms of Partnerschaft (Hornung 1967: 71; see also Dunand and Zivie-Coche 2002: 19; Te Velde 1980: 77–78; Wiedemann 1889: 311). Conversely, the Classical, Jewish, and Christian world shows, with obvious nuances, a more apparent anthropocentric perspective and a more explicit subordination of the animal to the man; cf. Smelik and Hemelrijk 1984: 1858–1860.

Overall, the appreciation of the Egyptian ‘animal worship’ in the ancient world remained imbued of a fundamental criticism toward the religious practice as barbaric and despicable, while its use as a literary *topos* was part of a wider discourse that, in the framework of the developments brought by Hellenism and early Christianity, aimed at establishing hierarchical distinctions (‘Us’ versus ‘Them’) between the engaged parties. Even with the more favourable position of Plutarch, and others with him, ‘animal worship’ continued to represent an ambiguous and disconcerting phenomenon, which could only become tolerable and understandable for a Greek or Roman public when interpreted symbolically. As Klaas Smelik and Emily Hemelrijk put it ‘Plutarch makes it clear that he cannot accept animal worship as such and that his interpretation of it is only an effort to present what was in fact unacceptable to himself and to his public, in such a way that it may be valued’.<sup>23</sup>

A full exploitation of ‘animal worship’ as an *argumentum* or *exemplum* within a general thematisation of Egypt as ‘the Other’ recurs abundantly in Latin literature. Cicero, for example, ironically contrasted the ludicrous practice of venerating animal *portenta* with the traditional image of Egyptian wisdom or criticised the Egyptians’ *dementia* (‘foolishness’) within a philosophical discussion designed for a systematic refutation of the religious mores of his contemporary society.<sup>24</sup> Such *portenta* were likewise mercilessly mocked by Juvenal in his satire,<sup>25</sup> while *monstra* were evoked by Virgil to celebrate the victory of Octavian over Cleopatra and Marck Antony at Actium.<sup>26</sup> In all these instances, the presentation of the phenomenon became instrumental to the political propaganda (Virgil) and especially to the moral criticism of present society (Cicero; Juvenal).<sup>27</sup> The polemics against the typically Egyptian ‘animal worship’ as a manifest sign of moral and cultural inferiority of that barbaric civilisation served then as a yardstick for measuring the current religious degeneration. In brief, the genuine historical quality of the phenomenon disappeared before its ideological projection as a value category.

The Jewish and early Christian literature pushed this line of interpretation to its furthest consequences. In the works of these authors, whose intellectual efforts were essentially focused on the polarisation between the true monotheism and the false ‘pagan’ polytheisms, the severe criticism against the practice of ‘animal worship’ turned into an unreserved condemnation of what was then seen not just as the lowest form of idolatry but as a true offence against the majesty of the sole god and his laws. In this perspective, the foolish Egyptians were doubly guilty, as they combined the veneration of hollow idols with that of irrational creatures.

At the end of this admittedly quick overview, one can draw three main conclusive remarks. First, ancient interpretations show an irreducible opposition between symbolic conceptualisation (positively evaluated) and ritual practice (disdainfully rejected). While ambiguity remains in the process of thematisation of Egyptian ‘otherness’, the balance usually shifts toward the negative end of the spectrum: ‘When interpreted symbolically it can be included in the conception of Egypt as the source of all wisdom. But it does fit better into the conception of Egyptian barbarism and stupidity: ridiculous Egyptians adoring animals as divine beings’.<sup>28</sup>

Second, such a dichotomy, which Martin Fitzenreiter aptly formulates in terms of ‘Weisheit beim symbolischen Zugang vs Primitivität beim kultischen Zugang’,<sup>29</sup> establishes the broad intellectual framework that still (more or less explicitly) underpins much of modern interpretive strategies, lying at the core of that paradoxical situation noted above: ‘animal worship’ appears as a distinctive

<sup>23</sup> Smelik and Hemelrijk 1984: 1961.

<sup>24</sup> Cic., *Nat. D.* I 16, 43; I 36, 101; III 19, 47. In general, on Cicero’s rhetorical use of the them ‘animal worship’, see Pfeiffer 2008, 372; Smelik and Hemelrijk 1984: 1955-1957.

<sup>25</sup> Juv., *Sat.* 15. 1-2. Feder 2003, 163; Smelik and Hemelrijk 1984: 1965-1967.

<sup>26</sup> Virg., *Aen.* VIII 698-700. Smelik and Hemelrijk 1984: 1853-1855.

<sup>27</sup> Pfeiffer 2008: 377-378 notes how this argument was wisely exploited in the Augustan propaganda to turn a political fight into a ‘clash of civilizations’.

<sup>28</sup> Smelik and Hemelrijk 1984: 2000.

<sup>29</sup> Fitzenreiter 2003b: 256.

product of Egyptian religion but only marginal to its full understanding when compared to other, allegedly more developed aspects (like theology and discourses about the higher gods).

Finally, besides any moral preconception or ideological bias, the narratives of the ancient authors should nonetheless be properly contextualised and related not just to the cultural *milieu* wherein they were produced but also to the historical setting framing the facts they described, namely Late and Graeco-Roman Egypt, meaning that they cannot be so easily projected backwards onto earlier periods and configurations. This is a crucial point that has important methodological implications, as it will be made clear in the following discussion.

### 1.3.2 *The research-horizon: problems and perspectives*

The beginning of modern scholarship on ‘animal worship’ can be established quite accurately, though symbolically, as it coincides with the greatly publicised discovery of the Serapeum of Saqqara by Auguste Mariette in November 1851.<sup>30</sup> Symbolically because, as stated above, the literary tradition served as the principal (but not only) channel<sup>31</sup> through which memory of the phenomenon was kept alive in the European mind to the extent that it was a piece of this substantial tradition, in the form of a well-known passage of the Greek geographer Strabo,<sup>32</sup> that encouraged the Frenchman to start investigations in North Saqqara.<sup>33</sup>

Since then, a number of studies have focused on the topic, though the quick development of the discipline around some major themes and privileged areas of interest have assigned ‘animal worship’ a more and more peripheral position both in the general reconstruction of the Egyptian religion and as a specific field of enquiry. In an attempt to outline a periodisation of the research history on this theme, one might roughly identify three major moments, which also help illustrate what orientations, perspectives, and cultural patterns have gradually shaped the current Egyptological notion of ‘animal worship’.

A first phase, from the end of the 19th to the mid-20th century, developed in keeping with the earliest efforts to systematically collect and arrange the facts and forms of the Egyptian religion, as they re-emerged from the original documentation, and to set them against both the information coming from the Classical tradition and the models defined by the contemporary evolutionary and positivist theories. Within that intellectual framework operated Alfred Wiedemann and his followers Theodor Hopfner and Hans Zimmermann: the former proposed the first Egyptological dissertation on the phenomenon,<sup>34</sup> the latter two produced a meticulous review of all the pertinent literary references.<sup>35</sup> Combining the use of the Classical sources with ethnological concepts and ideas of his time (migrationism; totemism; fetishism), Wiedemann’s model established that: (1) ‘animal worship’ is a typical feature of primitive religions but in the case of Egypt it remained popular until the very end of its civilisation; (2) a basic distinction occurred between the two categories of the *Inkorporationstier* or *Tempeltier* and *sakrosante Tiere*, of which he found correspondence in the passage of Strabo mentioning *theói* and *ierói* animals;<sup>36</sup> (3) the association between animals and high anthropomorphic gods is an artificial construction resulting from the shift of a conquering eastern group over an older ethnic substratum, with related overlapping of religious ideas. No deep relationship there was therefore between them, as the case of the Apis bull and the god Ptah

<sup>30</sup> Actually, work started in November 1850, but 12 November 1851 is the date of the discovery of the entrance of the so-called ‘Greater Vaults’, i.e., a section of the underground burial system excavated for the Apis bull (see *infra* § 5.1).

<sup>31</sup> The other one was represented by the thousands of animal mummies looted and variously reused as souvenirs for tourists, fuel for engines, fertiliser in agriculture, and remedy in traditional medicine. See Ikram 2005: 1.

<sup>32</sup> Strabo, *Geog.* XVII 1, 32.

<sup>33</sup> The basic account of the discovery is that of Mariette himself (1856; 1882). Today however it is known that he was not the first person to enter the monumental galleries of the Serapeum nor the first scholar to correctly suggest its localisation, though he was certainly the first to undertake a systematic exploration of the site. Dodson 2000; Lauer 1961; Malek 1983; Marković 2015.

<sup>34</sup> Wiedemann 1889; 1905; 1912.

<sup>35</sup> Hopfner 1913; Zimmermann 1912.

<sup>36</sup> Strabo, *Geog.* XVII 1, 22. A third class of *Fetsichtiere* kept in houses for private cult was also postulated.

would show, but the ancient animal-gods was reinterpreted as the incarnation-specimens of the new anthropomorphic deities, while the *sakrosante Tiere* were venerated as conspecifics of the single temple-individual.

While Wiedemann's interpretation remained influential in its fundamental distinction of the two classes of sacred animals, other general works more strongly reinforced the view of 'animal worship' as a discrete unit within a linear development. It is especially in the work of Gustave Jequier that the animistic and evolutionary ideas promoted by Edward B. Tylor found their best Egyptological formulation.<sup>37</sup> Set in a general framework in which religious and social forms match each other according to a precise tripartite scheme (fetishism/nomadism; zoolatry/sedentism; anthropomorphism/urbanism), 'animal worship' is reduced to a necessary and temporary stage toward the mature polytheism of urban complex societies, only surviving in full historical times as a secondary and socially peripheral fact.

A differently articulated ethnographic perspective on the topic can be recognised in two seminal studies on the Egyptian religion which, though proceeding from different theoretical and methodological bases, refuted and challenged an overall evolutionary understanding. Herman Kees' *Götterglaube im Alten Ägypten*<sup>38</sup> produced a valuable accumulation of religious material and a lucid exposition which, following the trend of studies inaugurated by Adolf Erman in Germany,<sup>39</sup> avoided the systematisations of animism and totemism and only trusted the first-hand data provided by the Egyptian textual and visual sources. The result was a 'positivist concentration on the "concrete" (das "Tatsätliche")', on the immediate facts of Egyptian beliefs',<sup>40</sup> with a detailed geographical presentation of all main aspects characterising local cults (animals, plants, cultic items, and full anthropomorphic deities).<sup>41</sup> This approach (*Kulttopographie*) removed 'animal worship' from the isolation it was placed in by evolutionary interpretation and made it into a part of a wider religious panorama, which gained its meaning from its deep connection with a precise locality. Likewise, Eberhard Otto focused on bull cults trying to explain their original role as a manifestation of local powers related to ideas of fertility and supremacy and fixed to individual cult places.<sup>42</sup>

On the other hand, Henri Frankfort took on a strong anthropological orientation and was greatly influenced by the phenomenology of religions. He contended that Kees and his followers assumed 'a scientist's rather than a scholar's attitude' that brought them to 'deny – explicitly or by implication – that one can speak of Egyptian religion as such'.<sup>43</sup> Instead, he intended to discover the 'unity in the domain of the spirit' behind the variety of temporal and geographical expressions, and look for 'those trends and qualities that seem to have shaped the character of Egyptian religion as a whole', concluding that '[b]efore tracing the history we should establish the identity of Egyptian religion'.<sup>44</sup>

Departing from the modern logical thought, Frankfort claimed that the ancient Egyptian mythopoeic thought worked according to what he defined as 'multiplicity of approaches', thus admitting a combination of different viewpoints that were held simultaneously valid and not mutually exclusive.<sup>45</sup> The mechanism was especially productive in the conceptualisation of

<sup>37</sup> Jequier 1946: 14-25.

<sup>38</sup> Kees 1956 (1941).

<sup>39</sup> Erman's approach, programmatically outlined at the beginning of his exposition on the Egyptian religion (1907: viii), was very influential over the following generation of German Egyptologist: 'I considered it advisable to present this sketch of Egyptian Religion as it appears to an unprejudiced observer, who knows nothing of the theories of the modern science of religions; the reader will here find nothing of animism, or fetishism, of chthonic deities, nor yet of medicine men. The facts should first be established and without prejudice, before we attempt to fit them into a scientific system'.

<sup>40</sup> Hornung 1982: 24.

<sup>41</sup> Kees 1956: 1-118.

<sup>42</sup> Otto 1964 (1938), especially, pp. 1-11.

<sup>43</sup> Frankfort 1948a: vi.

<sup>44</sup> Frankfort 1948a: vii, viii.

<sup>45</sup> Frankfort 1948a: 3-4.

religious phenomena and divine agency, and animals played a central role in this regard. As a consequence, animal cults were not a marginal product nor the survival of a primitive stratum but an essential, structural aspect of Egyptian religion. Frankfort explained that ‘*animals as such* possessed religious significance for the Egyptians’, and, drawing on the phenomenological notion of the numinous as *ganz Andere* developed by Rudolph Otto,<sup>46</sup> identified the key reason behind this peculiar attitude in ‘a religious interpretation of the animals’ *otherness*.<sup>47</sup> The Egyptian mind would have recognised this otherness in the static mode of life of the animal world participating in the unchangeable fixed order of the whole cosmos, and accordingly interpreted it as a manifestation of their super-human, divine nature.<sup>48</sup>

In his *Kingship and the God*, the scholar framed these ideas within a structural perspective, distinguishing three major domains of divine manifestation: the sun (as the power of creation), the earth (as the power of regeneration), and the cattle (as the power of procreation).<sup>49</sup> Expanding the latter point through ethnographic comparison with the African ‘cattle complex, the Dutch scholar gave an informed explanation for the outstanding importance of the bull cults in their connection with social institutions (kingship) and theological constructions.<sup>50</sup>

Despite such valuable premises, marked by a severe rigour in the acquisition of data and by a fruitful collaboration with the anthropological and historical-religious studies, at the mid of the 20th century ‘animal worship’ was quickly set aside as a secondary, marginal phenomenon. Under the leading influence of evolutionism, and informed by a teleological perspective that sees religious development as a progressive route from simple animistic forms to the higher experience of transcendence in monotheistic religions, ‘animal worship’ was more easily understood as a primitive stage in Egyptian religion that only survived in historical times as a practice of lower social classes, and exploded in the Late Period as an indicator of cultural crisis. This line of interpretation is exemplarily illustrated by Hans Bonnet, whose entry ‘Tierkult’ in his *Reallexikon der ägyptischen Religionsgeschichte* summarises and represents the official Egyptological position, focusing on two crucial aspects: (1) the origins and development of the phenomenon and (2) the status of the animals involved.<sup>51</sup> Concerning the historical dimension, he notes that theriomorphism ‘vermag doch nur dem primitiven Empfinden, aus dem sie erwachsen ist, zu genügen. Der Ägypter drängte jedenfalls früh über sie hinaus. Das zeigt die Vermenschlichung der Gottesbilder, die um die Wende zur geschichtlichen Zeit anhebt’: on the other hand, ‘[s]o vollzieht sich im Laufe des N.R. allmählich (...) eine Wendung zum T(ierkult), die der Zurückhaltung, die wir die offizielle Rel. üben sahen, zu widersprechen scheint. Sie ist in der Tat nicht von dieser ausgegangen (...) sie gründet im Glauben des Volkes. Dieser trägt ja immer eine starke Kraft des Beharrens in sich und bleibt gern Vorstellungen verhaftet, die einer Frühschicht angehören’.<sup>52</sup>

As for the religious meaning of the so-called ‘sacred animals’, Bonnet identifies their difference with other cult objects in that ‘haben die heiligen Tiere den sonstigen Kultobjekten gegenüber doch einen eigenen Charakter. Sie tragen Leben und Empfindung in sich’. Yet, it is exactly their nature of living creatures that represents to him a degrading element because ‘[i]n Wirklichkeit ist die Reinheit der Gottesvorstellung gerade durch die Beseeltheit des Kultobjektes bedroht. Denn um ihretwillen kann sich dieses dem schlichten Frommen nur allzu leicht an die Stelle des Gottesbildes selbst schieben, so daß er nicht mehr diesen im Bild des Tieres, sondern das Tier selbst verehrt. Dieses Absinken in einen reinen, das Tier vergottenden T(ierkult) ist unvermeidlich und allen Zeiten zu eigen’.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Otto 1917.

<sup>47</sup> Frankfort 1948a: 12-13.

<sup>48</sup> Frankfort 1948a: 13-14.

<sup>49</sup> Frankfort 1948b: 145-147.

<sup>50</sup> Frankfort 1948b: 162-168.

<sup>51</sup> Bonnet 1952.

<sup>52</sup> Bonnet 1952: 812, 816.

<sup>53</sup> Bonnet 1952: 813.



Overall, in the Egyptological perspective outlined by Bonnet, ‘animal worship’ came to be strictly revised and disregarded both historically, as a degeneration (*Entartung*) of traditional religion,<sup>54</sup> and socially, as a domain of popular religiosity that was excluded from official theology and naively confused the high divine agencies with their animal manifestations.<sup>55</sup>

A major turn in the approach to the problem has been generated by the work of three German scholars, who have inaugurated a seminal interpretive strategy – one might call it the *Abbild-These* – that has greatly contributed to the modern understanding of ancient Egyptian religion. They are Siegfried Morenz, Erik Hornung, and Jan Assmann.

Siegfried Morenz set ‘animal worship’ against a wider discussion on the essence of Egyptian religion, which was still the core matter of contemporary Egyptological debate. He aimed to ‘see Egyptian religion as the faith of the Egyptian people’ and to grasp, behind the profusion of manifestations ‘man’s relationship with God’, observing ‘the historical tendency to transcendence in all their deities’. In this perspective, theologically motivated and still informed by evolutionary ideas of religious development as an unescapable movement toward a transcendent conception of the divine, ‘animal worship’ with its late peak became something that needed to be fully explained. Accordingly, if ‘animal worship’ (Tierkult) can be intuitively defined as ‘die Verehrung des Tieres als Gottheit’, he noted that ‘[w]o Gott Gestalt annimmt (...) legt sich daher Verkörperung im T.(ier) nahe, weil hier zugleich Gestalt und numinose Andersartigkeit gegeben sind’. The key notions of his argument are *Verkörperung* (‘incarnation’) e *Gestalt* (‘form’): it is the incarnation of the divine power that allows the relationship between man and god and, on the other hand, this embodiment only concerns the exterior form of a deity, not his/her essential nature, while the animal appearance only provides one amongst various possibilities. In this regard, Morenz is explicit in remarking that ‘es sich stets um eine Verehrung der Gottheit handelte, die im T.(ier), offenbar als der angemessen lebendigen und zugleich fremdartig-numinosen Form begegnet’. The animal form, just like a cult image, served as a representation, an effective sign referring to a distinct divine person that deserved full devotion, while theological expressions like *wHm* and *bA* articulated the relationship between the tangible animal and the invisible superior entity addressed. For Morenz, therefore, Egyptian ‘animal worship’ had to be properly understood as the adoration of a high god through a living medium: ‘die Ägypter haben nicht Bilder und Tiere, sondern Götter verehrt!’ is the position defended in a brief contribution and reaffirmed in his study on the transcendence. The German scholar established a semiotic approach to the phenomenon in which the distinction between the (animal) sign and the (divine) object that the former represents (in the double meaning of ‘being in place of’ and ‘making present’) allowed to reconcile it with his crucial idea of an irreducible historical tendency to transcendence.

Erik Hornung took over and expanded this line of interpretation. His influential synthesis on Egyptian religion (1983 [1971]) questioned earlier theologically-driven studies and focused on Egyptian gods as ‘necessary objects of an inquiry that does not ask about their existence, their essence, or their value, but about their appearance and their meaning for believers (...)’.<sup>56</sup> Image is the key to interpret the multiform world of the gods and their representations. In this perspective, zoomorphism, hybridism, and anthropomorphism are all different but complementary modes of illustrating and making visible the divine to mankind, though the mixed form emerged as the privileged type. Nonetheless, all such representations should not be interpreted as ‘illustrations or descriptions of appearances, but rather as allusions to essential parts of the nature and function of deities’, in brief as ‘pictorial signs that convey meaning in a metalanguage’.<sup>57</sup> A deity could be

<sup>54</sup> Bonnet 1952: 820-821: ‘So zieht das Aufblühen des T(ierkult) zugleich eine Entartung nach sich’.

<sup>55</sup> Bonnet 1952: 813, 816.

<sup>56</sup> Hornung 1983: 31.

<sup>57</sup> Hornung 1983: 114, 117. Cf Frankfort 1948a: 12.

present in any of these signs, whether animate or inanimate (animals, plants, objects), but his/her true essence remained hidden.<sup>58</sup>

Like Morenz, Hornung explained the relationship between living animals and gods in the light of the New Kingdom/Late Period theology, according to which the former acted as the physical support and manifestation of the latter. Moreover, he distinguished the worship of a single specimen (like the Apis bull) from that of a whole species, for which one could properly speak of ‘animal cults’. He considered them in keeping with the typical Egyptian tendency to multiply visible images in order to make a god closer to and more accessible for the believers, noting however that as such ‘[a]nimal cults are therefore part of a popular piety, and (...) their logical extension, which was not put into practice before the late period, teaches us a misunderstanding rather than a genuine comprehension of the Egyptian conception of god. (...) For simple worshippers image and deity may merge, (...) but the theology of the priests always distinguishes carefully, in formulations that vary from period to period, between animal and deity’.<sup>59</sup> As a symbolic sign, the sacred animal participated in a sophisticated priestly discourse, but religious practice rested upon popular false impressions.

In a second brief essay specifically focused on the meaning of the animal form (1992 [1985]), Hornung insisted on the extensive exploitation of animals in Egyptian religion, both as living creatures and images, to inform about the nature and roles of the gods. The late ‘animal cults’ perfectly exemplify such a tendency, with whole species acting as intermediaries with the divine realms, especially through the widespread practice of mummification. The striking number of animal mummies has, for the scholar, the same value as the many votive bronzes of the time, since both were intended to materialise divine presence and proximity. In this perspective, animals showed an extraordinary religious intensity with a vast range of realisations: in the elaborate theological speculations, in the rich works of art, in the dramatic reality of the burials, they continuously referred to the higher sphere of the gods, thus expanding the possibilities to imagine and approach what they really are and do.

Finally, Jan Assmann has included some valuable comments on ‘animal worship’ in his general discussion on Egyptian religious thought and history. In a seminal study on theological discourse (2001 [1984]), drawing mainly on late textual sources, he built a polished *Theorie des Kultbildes* on the critical concept of ‘installation’ or ‘indwelling’ (*Einwohnung*).<sup>60</sup> The notion allows conceptualising that active, performative character of the divine presence within the local cultic dimension of the temple statue which the texts condensed in the idea of bA. Accordingly, ‘[t]he gods do not “dwell” on earth, which would merely be a condition; rather, they “install” themselves there, and specifically, they “install” themselves in their images: this is an event that occurs regularly and repeatedly, but with the collaboration of humankind, on whom the cult is dependent’.<sup>61</sup> The distinction god/image, already outlined by Morenz, remains but, in the god’s ability to ‘indwell’ and take on a visible form, Assmann grasps the fundamental theological nexus the Egyptian texts established between the two poles: ‘[t]he statue is not the image of the deity’s body, but the body itself. It does not represent his form, but rather gives him form. The deity takes form in the statue, just as in a sacred animal or a natural phenomenon’.<sup>62</sup>

Despite introducing the animal form, Assmann does not pursue this point further, but returns on it more diffusely in his monumental *Sinngeschichte* (2002 [1996]), which explores the net of semantic and mnemonic strategies through which the Egyptians organised and gave meaning to their past. In this perspective, the German scholar sees ‘animal worship’ as a long ‘secondary’ phenomenon of

<sup>58</sup> Hornung 1983: 124-125.

<sup>59</sup> Hornung 1983: 137.

<sup>60</sup> Assmann 2001: 40-47.

<sup>61</sup> Assmann 2001: 43.

<sup>62</sup> Assmann 2001: 46.

Egyptian religious panorama that only in Graeco-Roman times, especially thanks to the initiatives promoted by the Ptolemies, acquired a prominent position in the domain of official theology (and stronger visibility in the textual record) becoming, together with temple architecture and divine images, one of the three core areas of royal action.<sup>63</sup> Assmann emphasises two basic points: first, he interprets ‘animal worship’ as having a ‘triangular base’ (living incarnation; solar/cosmic manifestation; transfigured immortalisation) and being structurally akin to the royal cult. Secondly, he resumes and develops the discussion on the earthly manifestations of the divine. This can be realised in two ways, namely as ‘installation’ (*Einwohnung*) in monumental images (statues, reliefs, and even monumental buildings) and ‘incarnation’ (*Inkarnation*) in the person of the king or in living animals like the Apis bull or the falcon of Edfu, in which case a god ‘embodied himself in a sacred animal recognizable as such by the priest because of its form and coloring’.<sup>64</sup> By means of this double mechanism, Assmann concludes, ‘the divine engaged in a very profound contact with the human world (...) to sustain it. The influx of divine presence takes form of an energy that animates the statues and becomes flesh in the sacred animals’.<sup>65</sup>

Though explicitly limited to the later stage of Egyptian history, Assmann’s interpretation has the advantage of framing the standard *Abbild-These* within a context of ritual performance: it is the regular repetition of cult activities that ensures the maintenance of humans’ relationship with a deity and its multiple tangible forms, but such a beneficial exchange is only possible within the secluded and protected space of the temple.

The ideas of Morenz, Hornung, and Assmann have thus shaped a powerful intellectual strategy to address the issues of ‘animal worship’: (1) conceptually, it can be aligned with other aspects of Egyptian belief and be related to the official theological discourse which, with the bA-doctrine, ratifies the ontological distinction between the hidden deity and the animal form as a visible and temporary manifestation of that higher power; (2) historically, the phenomenon in its full-fledged form only becomes significant in later times as part of an institutional programme of political-cultural enhancement carried out through the intensification of symbolic forms and cult practices; (3) socially, the identification of animal and god (i.e., of the sign with its object) and the following popular veneration paid to living creatures represent a misunderstanding of common people, who are not able to make the distinction between the two levels.

The impact of this model in the study of Egyptian religion can hardly be overlooked when one considers its quick and effective adoption in scholarly literature, with the result that it has allowed removing or, at best, reducing discussion on ‘animal worship’ in its factual reality.<sup>66</sup> One cannot fail to note, in this regard, that ‘animal worship’ does not feature in modern reconstructions as an object of analysis *per se*, but always – when not completely avoided – as a brief mention within a broader presentation of Egyptian conceptions and representations of the gods. It fits a recurrent pattern according to which, just to give an example, the animal form matters as a divine icon, of which the consistency (‘the bestiary present in the divine iconography was extremely coherent’) and the rationale underlying various visual solutions (‘As for the combination of human and animal into a single figure (...) a double representation of a god under two different species enriched the approach’) are positively emphasised, while practice is only rapidly alluded to (‘The livestock farming that was intensively developed at temples with the last native dynasties presents a borderline situation’).<sup>67</sup>

These observations do not imply that ‘animal worship’ has not aroused interest and debate within Egyptology. Works and studies have been consecrated to and have greatly expanded our knowledge

<sup>63</sup> Assmann 2002: 374-375.

<sup>64</sup> Assmann 2002: 407.

<sup>65</sup> Assmann 2002: 408.

<sup>66</sup> Fitzenreiter 2003: 252-254 with references.

<sup>67</sup> Dunand and Zivie-Coche 2004: 17, 19, 21.



of individual cases, specific classes of evidence, and distinctive aspects. Yet, when confronted with historical-religious interpretation, scholars stick to the strategies and opinions so far examined to the extent that discussion is reduced to the symbolic association between the animal form and the divine entity concealed behind it.

A full reappraisal of the topic has been carried out by Dieter Kessler since the end of the past century. On the basis of his investigation of the animal necropolis at Tuna el-Gebel, he has been working to revise the Egyptological *communis opinio*, which he considers flawed and imprecise.<sup>68</sup>

His research focuses on the established tradition of animal necropolises of the Late and Graeco-Roman periods and, as the title of his monumental study makes clear, is especially concerned about the administration supporting the breeding and burial of sacred animals, but also draws important conclusions on the cultic and theological aspects of the phenomenon.<sup>69</sup> The central thesis is that the development and multiplication of animal cemeteries, with their related institutions and practices, were carefully planned and controlled by the central state, and were related to the sphere of royal ideology. First of all, Kessler argues against some recurrent Egyptological ideas, namely that: (1) ‘animal worship’ was a form of popular devotion typical of the lower classes; (2) its expansion resulted from the crisis of the official religion and from the experience of foreign political dominations that Egypt went through in the 1st millennium BC, as a form of nationalistic reaction to that pressure; (3) there was an actual distinction between ‘sacred’ and ‘divine’ animals as improperly deduced from Classical sources (*in primis* Strabo, *Geog.* XVII 1, 22); (4) all sacred animals were understood as permanent bA-manifestations of a god.<sup>70</sup>

These points are variously addressed in the central part of the study, which discusses the main known funerary contexts (Bubastis, Mendes, Saqqara, Tuna el-Gebel, etc.) in relation to the associated animal figures and on the basis of papyrological and material evidence. In each case, Kessler develops analysis along the two tracks of the administrative and ideological functioning of the cults, emphasising the role of kingship at the expense of the popular dimension. In the end, Kessler reconfigures late Egyptian ‘animal worship’ as an institution that depended, in terms of both organisation and theology, from the central state and specifically from the funerary royal temple.<sup>71</sup> Animal burials and cemeteries belonged to the domain of royal and temple cults and were thus integrated within an official, state-run religious context, serving as sacred places where the cyclical rejuvenation of the high god (*Hochgott*) was ritually performed during yearly festivals in combination with the renovation of kingship. Administratively, these cults were installed, sponsored, and regulated by the state in a centrally-ordered *nomos* area, and were maintained by formally recognised and hierarchically structured cultic associations that limited access to sacred spaces and to ritual actions, thus removing personal piety and diffuse popular participation from interpretation. Theologically, sacred animals, both living and dead, were only a temporary bA-form of a great god within a cycle of transformations that were ritually enacted at festive events to ensure the continuous process of rebirth of deities and kings.<sup>72</sup>

Kessler’s attempt to build a different framework for ‘animal worship’ has been differently received in Egyptology, and raises some issues.<sup>73</sup> His analysis programmatically revolves around documentary Greek and Demotic sources rather than iconographic or purely religious evidence, thus placing kingship and the state at the centre of discussion. Accordingly, he opposes the view of the phenomenon as bound to the official sphere of cult against the low, ‘popular’ characterisation given in earlier studies. In this, Kessler hits a critical point, though he seems to push it too far and just turn the situation around in terms of social interpretation (from common people to kings

<sup>68</sup> Kessler 1986; 1989; 2003; 2017–2018; Kessler and Nur el-Din 2005; von den Driesch *et al.* 2005.

<sup>69</sup> Kessler 1989.

<sup>70</sup> Kessler 1986: 3–15.

<sup>71</sup> Kessler 1986: 253–255.

<sup>72</sup> Kessler 1986: 291–303.

<sup>73</sup> For reviews of his work, see Hornung 1993; de Meulenare 1996; Van Rinsveld 1996.

and priests).<sup>74</sup> Hornung, however, warns against such ‘apodiktische Feststellungen’ and remarks how late magical texts (*Zaubertexten*) and Ramesside ‘animal stelae’ (*Tierstelen*) invite us to a more balanced understanding.<sup>75</sup> Moreover, while questioning traditional categories, the conceptual framework proposed by the author to clarify the religious status and function of the animals involved (especially the crucial terms *Festgeschehen* and *Festzyklus*) remains vaguely defined and poorly explained. On the other hand, his focused approach to the archaeological and documentary reality of late Egyptian animal necropolises has restored an extremely vibrant picture of how diffuse and rooted the phenomenon was throughout the country, a fact indicative *per se* of its historical-religious significance, thus turning attention to the material qualities and practical dimension, not just to the ideological expressions, of ‘animal worship’.

In the past decades, the recovery of systematic excavations at strategic sites (North Saqqara; Mendes; Tuna el-Gebel), with the improved publication of texts and materials, the extending of archaeological activities to new, promising sites, the development of wide interdisciplinary research programmes have been marking a strong renewal of scientific interest in ‘animal worship’ in general, and its most apparent aspect, animal cemeteries and burial practices, in particular. Yet, religious discussion and historical reconstruction continue to be largely informed by the interpretive models examined so far or by more intuitive strategies, though with a growing concern for methodological refinement, conceptual framework, and historical perspective. Two recent initiatives stand out in this regard, as especially keen toward these aspects.

The monumental *Bestiaire des Pharaons* compiled by Pascal Vernus and Jean Yoyotte combines the French encyclopedic tradition, with a solid semiotic approach and religious phenomenology in order to map and characterise the full spectrum of animal presences within pharaonic civilisation.<sup>76</sup> The unifying viewpoint is that ‘la faune si riche et si variée (...) les anciens Égyptiens l’ont exploitée dans leur imaginaire non seulement avec une capacité d’observation poussée, mais aussi (...) avec le souci impérieux de lui donner sens à l’intérieur d’une vision d’ensemble du monde’.<sup>77</sup> In this perspective, ‘animal worship’ represents one of multiple fields in which the experience of ‘les animaux dans la religion égyptienne’<sup>78</sup> is organised in terms of integration of the animal form within a system of religious signs referring to the divine sphere, as part of a wider process of cultural and symbolic semiotisation (construction of sense) of the animal world.<sup>79</sup>

Martin Fitzenreiter has devoted great efforts to set the lack of concern for ‘animal worship’ in the traditional presentation of Egyptian religion against a critical assessment of how that area of study has been shaped within Egyptology, identifying three main shortcomings in the methodology.<sup>80</sup> A first point concerns the strong influence exerted by the ancient literary tradition, and especially by the biblical model, not just in (de)selecting and (de)valuing certain themes but also in building a cultural grid and a broad narrative strategy for the presentation of Egyptian religion. Secondly, there is the underlying westerner idea – again conditioned by a Jewish-Christian background and rarely discussed in explicit terms – of religion as belief system and discourse about (transcendent) god(s), sometimes joint with a more or less implicit evolutionary and teleological understanding (cf. *supra*). Accordingly, ancient religion is preferably approached via textual sources, as a privileged way of access to Egyptian ideas and conceptions, with the result that only limited importance is assigned to material culture, and that too often later texts are used to interpret earlier allegedly ‘mute’ evidence, thus assuming a substantial temporal uniformity in religious facts and reiterating the *cliché* of an ‘immutable Egypt’.

<sup>74</sup> See Kessler 1986: 295, 299.

<sup>75</sup> Hornung 1993: 22-23. See however Kessler

<sup>76</sup> Vernus and Yoyotte 2005.

<sup>77</sup> Vernus and Yoyotte 2005: 13.

<sup>78</sup> Vernus and Yoyotte 2005: 20-49.

<sup>79</sup> The other large domains in which animal presence is culturally articulated include literature, writing and language. See Vernus and Yoyotte 2005: 50-61, 62-75, 76-93.

<sup>80</sup> Fitzenreiter 2003a; 2003b; 2004.

A firmer understanding, according to Fitzenreiter, should be built upon a theoretical approach that looks at ‘practical religion’ rather than at theological speculation and discursive formulations, thus expanding the range of what religion is, and that programmatically integrates archaeology and material evidence in the interpretive process. In this perspective, he has rightly characterised ‘animal worship’ as ‘ein Begleitmotiv ägyptischer religiöser Praxis’<sup>81</sup> of which both chronological depth and cultic variability should be properly recognised, emphasising the plurality of cultic forms in which a living or dead animal presence is made religiously significant.<sup>82</sup> His recent synthesis on Egyptian animal cults (*Tierkulte*) develops these points in a broad historical and critical perspective.<sup>83</sup> It is – in the words of the author – ‘der Versuch, eine kulturwissenschaftlich-archäologische Perspektive bei der Beschreibung der Religion einer längst vergangenen Gesellschaft einzunehmen’,<sup>84</sup> and offers an updated and complete overview of the topic, based on a wider range of sources than just texts, and accordingly aimed at producing a more complex and integrated account on the cultic, historical, and social complexity of the phenomenon. The present study draws on this stimulating perspective – ‘animal worship’ as a field of religious practice (*Praxis*) – and moves along a similar line of investigation, though with a stronger theoretical concern and a restricted chronological focus.

### 1.3.3 Animal worship: the ‘Standard Model’

At the end of this review, in the light of the fundamental observations made by Fitzenreiter and summarised above, it becomes possible to appreciate how ‘animal worship’ has been confined to a marginal position (*Grenzegebiet*) in the scholarly agenda and reconstruction of ancient Egyptian religion. In the dominant Egyptological perspective, (1) literary tradition, (2) textual/philological concerns, and (3) Western conceptual framework design a biased intellectual approach, both in the nomenclature to which most scholars cling with no critical assessment and in the descending assumptions about religious development (and decline) that still restrain many studies. The idea that historical interpretation, especially about broad religious themes, might be informed by assumptions tends to be (consciously or unconsciously) discounted.

This becomes apparent when one looks at how the tripartite pattern just mentioned works on the modern understanding of ‘animal worship’ as ‘die Verehrung des Tieres als Gottheit’ – to use Morenz’s words:<sup>85</sup>

1. Literary tradition > prompt reception and incorporation of the Classical/Biblical idea of the Egyptians honouring animals as gods into the Egyptological definition. One can compare, just to give an example of such a tendency, Morenz’s formulation with Plutarch’s statement about the Egyptians ‘venerating the animals themselves and treating them as gods’ (*therapèuontes autà ta zòa kai perièpontes os theoùs*).<sup>86</sup>
2. Textual approach > focused attention on the New Kingdom and later attestations of the bA-predication and theology as the only source and frame of explanation.
3. Western categorisation of religion as ‘belief in god(s)’ > discussion restricted to what accidental animal forms can symbolically say about the gods, their roles, and essence.

The issue, of course, lies not in the definition itself, which, as it will be shown below, might be as useful as any others, but in how it has been constructed and characterised as well as in how it serves historical analysis. In this regard, the notion of ‘animal worship’ has been developed as a recurrent but inconsistent category, which remains subject to preconceptions and generalisations. As a consequence, we can identify an Egyptological ‘Standard Model’ (Figure 1.1.; Table 1.1) that

<sup>81</sup> Fitzenreiter 2003a: 12.

<sup>82</sup> Fitzenreiter 2003a: 13–14.

<sup>83</sup> Fitzenreiter 2013a.

<sup>84</sup> Fitzenreiter 2013a: 11.

<sup>85</sup> After Morenz 1962a: 896.

<sup>86</sup> Plut., *De Is. et Os.* 20 (359 B).

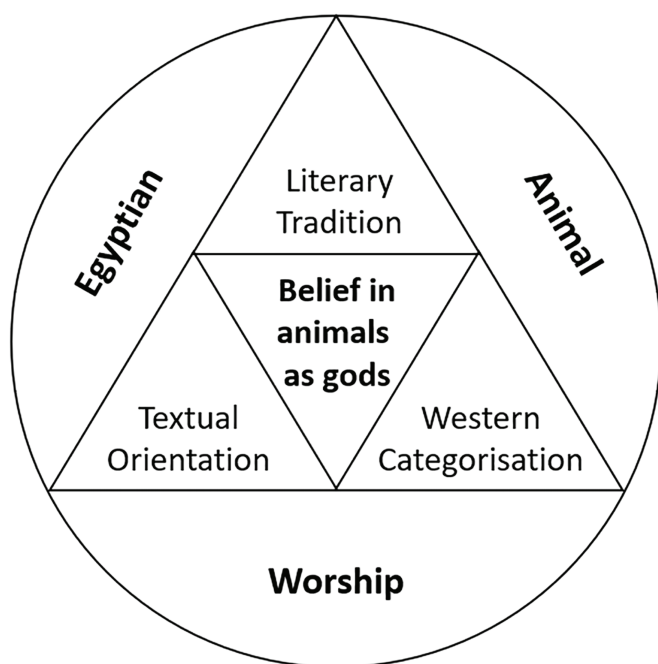


Figure 1.1. Diagram illustrating the conceptual background of the Egyptological ‘Standard Model’ of Egyptian ‘animal worship’.

(re)constructs the historical-religious significance of ‘animal worship’ mainly in terms of visual metaphor symbolising individual divine powers, while its articulation as living practice remains generally underestimated or poorly described.<sup>87</sup> The term ‘model’ is evidently intended here as a catchy word to define not a systematic approach but a regular interpretive strategy or pattern, easily recognised in literature, which tends to positively emphasise certain aspects (left column) over others (right column), ultimately reproducing that polarisation between theological discourse and ritual practice already discussed in relation to Classical literary sources (*supra* § 1.3.1).

Looking at the table below, two further considerations can be drawn. First, there is the reluctance to deal with certain tangible, physical manifestations of the divine. The identification of a living animal as a god-like being cannot but result from a conceptual mistake of the simple believer, unable to distinguish (unlike the educated priests) between visible forms and invisible deities.<sup>88</sup> Rather, it will be shown that the misunderstanding lies in the application of the modern western category of ‘god’ (with all its cultural and theological background) to the flexible Egyptian notion of *ntr*.

Animal Worship and Egyptian Religion		
	+	-
Content	Symbolism (zoomorphic/mixed forms)	Ritual actions (mainly burials)
Time	Full pharaonic times	Prehistory/Late period
Mode	Theological discourse	Popular veneration
Agent	Priestly élite	Common people
Significance	Conceptualisation of gods	Religious practice

Table 1.1. ‘Animal worship’ and Egyptian religion according to the ‘Standard Model’.

A second consideration concerns the temporal dimension. The ‘Standard Model’ basically attaches ‘animal worship’ to the two chronological ends of Prehistory and the Late/Graeco-Roman periods with no real diachronic depth (Figure 1.2). Thus, for Lázlo Kákósy, while the veneration of animals is one of the earliest aspects of Egyptian religion, ‘hatten die Tiere im religiösen Leben und Kult im

<sup>87</sup> See Colonna 2017. The statement, of course, refers to the general understanding of the phenomenon and not to the treatments of its later manifestations and multiple contexts, for which detailed studies and overview are available

<sup>88</sup> See Hornung 1983: 137.

AR und MR keine zentrale Rolle gewonnen’ until the New Kingdom foundation of Serapeum under Amenhotep III.<sup>89</sup> He shares this opinion with Smelik and Hemelrijk, according to whom ‘animal worship disappeared in the historical periods and did not reappear until the New Kingdom’,<sup>90</sup> while Alan Lloyd speaks of ‘occasional glimpses through much of Eg(yptian) History, until the great upsurge of popular worship in the L(ate) P(eriod) brought it conspicuously to the fore’.<sup>91</sup> Despite the factual remark on the increased visibility of the phenomenon in the final stages of Egyptian history, in all these cases the historical issue remains disregarded on behalf of discontinuous and disconnected representation of its development – one might also incidentally note the straight connection linking the ideas of ‘great upsurge’ and ‘popular worship’ in the same sentence –, with a substantial ratification, in Lloyd’s assessment as a ‘retrograde movement’, of the anti-historical, negative view already expressed by Hans Bonnet.<sup>92</sup>

Thus, the Egyptological ‘Standard Model’ on ‘animal worship’ reveals two major shortcomings that severely limits the possibility to produce a broad synthesis and a well-structured interpretation, beyond individual cases:<sup>93</sup>

1. Lack of theoretical framework, resulting in definitions or descriptions that continue to rely, intrinsically and often uncritically, on literary paradigms of Classical/Biblical origin, and to maintain more or less accentuated t(h)e(le)ological undertones. No heuristic category can be built this way.
2. Lack of historical perspective, resulting in a simplistic appraisal of the phenomenon and its configurations in terms of both religious practice (= animal burials), social diffusion (= popular religiosity), and chronological articulation (= Late Period).

### The Standard Model

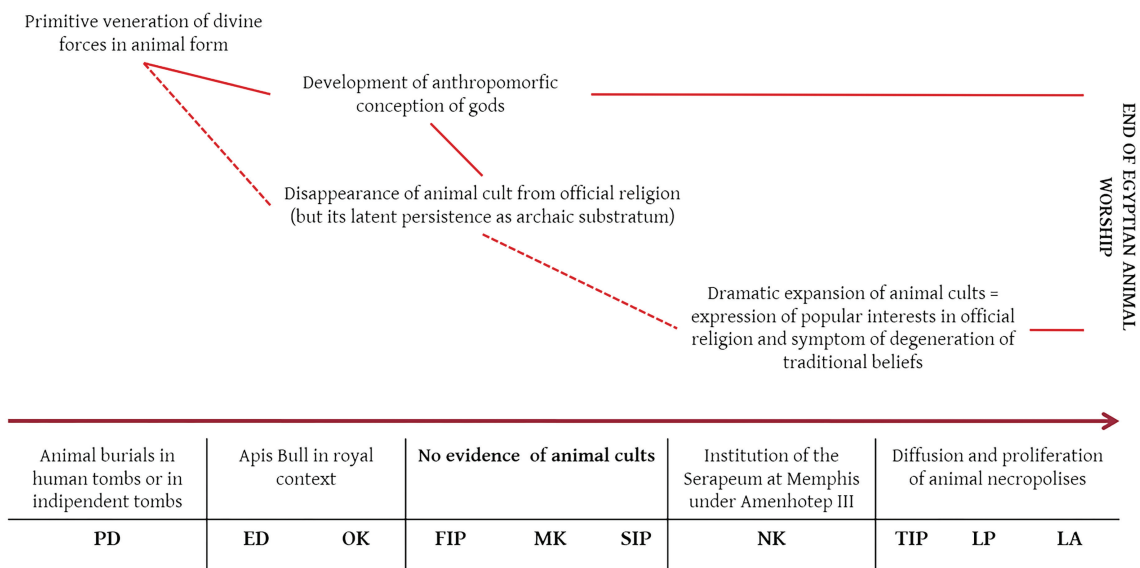


Figure 1.2. Historical development of ‘animal worship’ according to the ‘Standard Model’. Slightly modified from Colonna 2017: Figure 1.

<sup>89</sup> Kákosy 1977: 662.

<sup>90</sup> Smelik and Hemelrijk 1984: 1863.

<sup>91</sup> Lloyd 1976, 293.

<sup>92</sup> Lloyd 1976, 293.

<sup>93</sup> See Colonna 2017: 108.



## 1.4 Theory and methodology

In order to redress the imbalance, the present study identifies (1) in the construction of an explicit conceptual framework, and (2) in the historical-religious perspective of the so-called ‘Italian School of History of Religions’ – particularly refined through the intellectual efforts of Raffaele Pettazzoni and Angelo Brelich –<sup>94</sup> a methodological shift that may indicate a different, more productive way of understanding ‘animal worship’, allowing us to (re)phrase and (re)assess ancient (‘emic’) ideas and actions in modern (‘etic’) terms and categories without dismissing their historical and practical dimension.

In the debate around ancient Egyptian ‘animal worship’, just like for any other religious topic, two types of problems combine – one methodological, the other historical – related respectively to the critical assessment of the notion at play and to the range of manifestations to which it may apply, as they can be recovered from textual and archaeological sources.

Theoretically, it is argued that explicitly designed approaches and interpretive patterns together with critically defined concepts strengthen interpretation and are as useful as required when attempting wider synthesis. Terminological discussion sets up a discursive arena for delimiting the object of inquiry and reflecting upon its conceptualisation by providing a focus for analysis. Practice and display are here proposed as key concepts providing that focus. Besides, theoretical frameworks help modelling patterns and gaps in the available sources, connecting data in meaningful ways, and countering (at least in part) the inevitable limitations due to the partial and scattered distribution of the archaeological record.

Historically, the approach suggested moves from the essential consideration that that ‘every *phainomenon* is a *genomenon*, each apparition presupposes a formation, and behind every event there is a process of development’.<sup>95</sup> Against religious phenomenology that describes and classifies religious forms horizontally as rooted in the unifying numinous experience of ‘the sacred’ (the latter conceived as an objectified autonomous reality)<sup>96</sup>, the historical-religious method considers these facts as historical formations placed in time and space and belonging to given cultural *milieux*. Accordingly, rather than looking at ‘animal worship’ as an odd later phenomenon, the survival of prehistoric times surfacing abruptly and massively in times of crisis under the pressure of popular devotion, it should be regarded as a cultural-historical product of human creativity possessing its unique qualities, concrete expressions, and line of development that need to be analysed both contextually and diachronically.

### 1.4.1 The problem of a definition and the definition of a problem

A central issue, therefore, concerns terminology i.e., the definition of the concept, the attached meaning, and ultimately the very possibility of its use as a heuristic category. On this point, one might note a certain ambiguity both at the general level of *Religionswissenschaft* and specifically in the field of Egyptology.

In modern religious studies the notion of ‘animal worship’ usually recurs in relation to ethnographic or prehistoric contexts while the Egyptian case is incidentally mentioned as an outstanding historical example, remarkable for its rich documentation.<sup>97</sup> On the other hand, the conceptual inadequacy and the ethnocentric connotation of the term are often highlighted.

<sup>94</sup> A valuable presentation of the key theoretical and methodological aspects of the School and of its main representatives is given by Massenzio 2005.

<sup>95</sup> Pettazzoni 1959: 10.

<sup>96</sup> Otto 1917.

<sup>97</sup> Fitzenretiter 2003b: 230-235.

In Egyptological literature, labels such as ‘zoolatry’, ‘animal worship/cult/veneration’ are widely used, though with not much consistency, and it is only in recent years that research has shown a keener attention to the problems raised by the related concepts (origin and development; semantic shifts and changes in their use).<sup>98</sup> The point is especially addressed in German scholarship. On the one hand, Dieter Kessler claims that ‘Tierverehrung und Tierkult sind (...) eigentlich unzutreffende und unscharfe ägyptologische Schlagworte, besonders wenn sie dazu dienen sollen, einen angeblich bodenständigen Teil einer altägyptischen Religiosität ein- und abzugrenzen’.<sup>99</sup> On the other hand, as Martin Fitzenreiter points out, the notion of ‘animal worship’ ‘sehr (...) sinnvoll ist, die Spezifität der kultischen Behandlung von Tieren in Ägypten mit einem Schlagwort zu belegen, so problematisch ist es, diese auf eine oder zwei besonders prägnante Erscheinungsformen zu reduzieren’.<sup>100</sup>

In this respect, two aspects, strictly interlaced, require closer consideration: (1) the current term of ‘animal worship’ is not a neutral designation but, quite the opposite, is packed with a whole range of underlying nuances and implications that still affect its definition; (2) accordingly, it is imperative, from an operational viewpoint, to maintain a distinction between (a) the analysis of the employs of the concept as indicators of the history of the attitudes and interpretations in modern research and (b) the assessment of its heuristic value. In this case, one must reconsider the terms of discussion inasmuch as, at the level of definition, the only decisive criterion in the formulation and application of any conceptual category concerns its efficacy as an analytical tool for classifying, organising, and communicating data.

The acknowledgement of these two levels (history and legitimacy of the concept) is particularly helpful in exposing that process of semantic stratification which has more and more connoted the notion at issue. Thus, it appears – and it is all the more evident in view of the lack of a specific Egyptian term that would facilitate discussion – that the very idea of an Egyptian ‘animal worship’ is the historical product of Western culture, which has been shaped and articulated under the original and powerful influence of the Classical and Biblical tradition. Such an obvious remark, however, descends from an important methodological premise that is often neglected i.e., the need to remember that the definitions we use do not correspond to universal, invariable ontological categories, but are circumstantial constructs resulting from (and reflecting) a whole series of mutable cultural patterns, ideological frameworks, and conceptual schemes. In brief, notions themselves have a history, which we can follow through the precise intellectual strategies adopted in scholarly literature. ‘Animal worship’ is no exception in this regard: it is not a determinate concept with a fixed meaning, but one that has been variously constituted and reconstituted within our European intellectual tradition. In the notion of ‘animal worship’, as it has been developed as an object first of *kulturalles Gedächtnis* and then of scientific enquiry, different paradigms have converged and combined: polemic (as a category of otherness and cultural condemnation), anthropologic-evolutionary (as a discrete stage or structural aspect of religious formation), semiotic-symbolic (as a sign in the conceptualisation of the divine).<sup>101</sup> We must be aware, of course, of this historical legacy if we want to avoid the risk of projecting (consciously or unconsciously) our (pre)conceptions (or even values) onto the notion and use it as an operable tool for analysis.

Thus, turning to the heuristic efficacy of the concept, it is worth reminding some valuable indications of method provided by Angelo Brelich about the construction and application of historical-religious categories, which will allow us to move beyond intuitive definitions or purely abstract formulations. Brelich correctly states that the definition of a religious phenomenon

<sup>98</sup> Bonnet 1952; Fitzenreiter 2003a; 2003b; 2013; Kessler 1986; 2003; Morenz 1962a.

<sup>99</sup> Kessler 2003: 36.

<sup>100</sup> Fitzenreiter 2003: 12-13.

<sup>101</sup> See also Fitzenreiter 2013a: 189-193, who suggests a slightly different articulation, identifying three main Egyptological patterns: ‘die evolutionische, die ethnologische, und semiotische’.

cannot be given *a priori* and *more geometrico* but should be built *a posteriori* and progressively, on the basis of documented facts:

[I]n campo storico campo storico (...) una definizione aprioristica, più o meno precisa, è perfettamente inutile; la condizione di una sua utilità è che a questa definizione corrisponda effettivamente una realtà storica coerente e precisa.<sup>102</sup>

This does not mean proceeding with arbitrary attributions of meaning, nor presuming that the meaning we establish is something fixed and immutable; it rather means producing a functional definition of terms usually belonging to our Western tradition so that they can be positively used within a certain field of research, with no ambiguities and clear scopes:

Si tratta dunque di trovare una definizione funzionale, di determinare un concetto che possa servire a fini scientifici, e non di formulare una definizione basata sulle caratteristiche immutabili che distinguono una cosa dall'altra.<sup>103</sup>

With regard to 'animal worship', it has been opportunely noted that the Egyptological distinction, especially evident in German studies, between 'worship/cult' (*Tierkult*) and 'veneration' (*Tierveneration*) reminds of the difference set within Catholic tradition between *adoratio* (limited to God) and *veneratio* (addressed e.g. to the community of saints). This adds to the habit, well-established in the frame of the 'Standard Model', of reducing 'animal worship' to a restricted domain of Egyptian religion, of which individual aspects (*in primis* animal burials and zoomorphism) are variously emphasised as qualifying its content and put at the centre of interpretation. Accordingly, it is abstractly isolated (and evaluated) not just in terms of content but also of chronological development (prehistoric/'primitive' – late/'decadent' phase of religion) and social context (lower strata of society). Yet, from the historical-critical perspective, such an understanding fails to grasp the complexity and full significance of the phenomenon, its practical and diachronic articulations:

[I]n fatto di storia, le definizioni rischiano sempre di irrigidire le idee, mentre vale la pena che esse mantengano duttilità e plasticità, onde poter aderire alle molteplici sfaccettature della realtà concreta.<sup>104</sup>

Against this conceptual background and in view of Brelich's strong exhortation to remove naivety and approximations from the vocabulary of historical investigation, especially when inherited from influential consolidated traditions, the notion of 'animal worship' is here defined as a recurrent segment of religious practice in which the mobilisation of living/dead animals (both individuals and groups) represents a central focus of ritual action and is thematised as a central theme of monumental display.

The concept is articulated much differently from standard formulations, and will be commented on and expanded further at the end of this study. The fact that it is proposed here in a first loose formulation does not stand in contradiction with Brelich's warning against aprioristic definitions. First, it is intended as a deliberate declaration of method and assessment of the critical terminology that will recur in this work, so it needs to be laid out as clearly as possible. Secondly, it is designed as an operative tool that will be practically deployed (a) as a working hypothesis to be tested (and

<sup>102</sup> 'In history (...) a more or less precise definition a priori is completely impractical; the condition for its efficacy is that the definition corresponds to a coherent and exact historical reality'; Brelich 1976: 7. See also Brelich 1966: 4: 'Definizioni *a priori* servono nelle scienze deduttive (...) non servono nella storia, dove i concetti si formano in base ai fatti osservati (...) i concetti storici si formano, dunque, *a posteriori*' ('Definitions *a priori* work in deductive sciences (...) they do not work in history, where concepts are developed on the basis of the facts observed (...) historical concepts are thus developed *a posteriori*').

<sup>103</sup> 'It means therefore finding a functional definition, establishing a concept that can be used for scientific goals, and not formulating a definition based on immutable characteristics that would distinguish one thing from another'; Brelich 1976: 7.

<sup>104</sup> '[I]n history, definitions always risk to stiffen ideas, while it is valuable that they maintain ductility and plasticity so as to hold fast to the multiple facets of actual reality'; Brelich 1976: 31.



adjusted) against the evidence, and (b) as a dynamic pattern to bring (textual, archaeological, visual) data into conversation with humanistic enquiry. Accordingly, it does not serve as a single, univocal explanation but as an attempt to take the ancient Egyptian practice (and its presentation in the sources) seriously.

The proposed definition has some relevant implications for academic debate that is worth highlighting explicitly as they are indicative of the different theoretical approach and conceptual framework underpinning the present investigation:

1. It does not have any normative value nor it does claim universal agreement. After all, a definition does not need to be universally accepted to be useful. As with any other formula, the present definition illustrates a theory and a method, and it is elaborated accordingly. Here, the notions of ritual practice and display are the main focusing lenses through which analysis is conducted. Moreover, these and other ideas (like Gell's theory of agency; see *infra* § 6.4) are not simply drawn on and strictly applied to the data, rather they are combined with the particular Egyptian material (and the indigenous concepts they possibly record) to make better and more articulated arguments. The key point, therefore, is not to replace one overarching interpretation with another, but rather to problematise traditional understanding and engage more seriously with the sources, the practices, and contexts they relate to, so as to outline a more nuanced picture.
2. It programmatically avoids the problematic and heatedly debated concepts of 'god' and 'veneration', due to their heavy cultural background, stressing, with Martin Fitzenreiter, the role of religious practice and action over theological statements and a simplistic 'belief in gods'.<sup>105</sup> This shift in perspective (from conceptions of gods to practice) leaves room for a potentially richer expansion of relevant data and configurations that can be included in our research on 'animal worship', thus countering its alleged marginal position within the ancient Egyptian religious panorama.
3. It allows for a fruitful cross-cultural comparison. While the Egyptian record is uniquely rich, the general image in which specific animals are mobilised and manipulated as a focus of religious practice is something that can be attested in other archaeological and ethnographic examples. The point is that, once released from the limitations of conventional positions (religion as mainly concerned with gods and what texts say about gods), literary-based assumptions (real animals mistakenly treated as gods), and naïve reasonings (veneration of animals as a sign of a primitive mentality and late decadence), the results of the study of Egyptian 'animal worship' could be brought into a broader cross-cultural perspective and positively inform theoretical and anthropological discussions on similar ideas and practices. Rather than demoting the specificity of the Egyptian case, this would help break its biased perception as an isolated odd phenomenon and highlight its originality by setting it within a more general pattern.<sup>106</sup>

Overall, the definition proposed prospects and summarises a more productive approach and line of inquiry than interpretive positions in which the acknowledgement of the historical quality of the phenomenon is subordinated to abstracted schemes, anachronistic sensibilities, or implicit assessments of value.

<sup>105</sup> Fitzenreiter 2003a; 2004.

<sup>106</sup> While this point cannot be pursued here, the inclusion of some contributions focused on different contexts (modern Egypt; Africa; India) within the collection of studies on Egyptian animal cults edited by Martin Fitzenreiter (2003) interestingly moves along the lines sketched above. Moreover, it suits well with the comparative-historical agenda propounded by the 'Roman School of History of Religions'; see Brelich 1976: 33-55.

### 1.4.2 *The practical dimension: religious practice and ritual*

A practice-oriented perspective of religion focuses on human activity and ritual as social actions.<sup>107</sup> Practice – an open-ended bundle of activities (including both doings and sayings) – has, according to Catherine Bell, four features: it is situational, strategic, embedded in a misrecognition of what it is in fact doing, and able to reproduce or reconfigure a vision of the order of power in the world.<sup>108</sup> Practice, therefore, is a social phenomenon since it is embedded in a social (and historical) context of multiple relationships. The point of the qualifier ‘religious’ is to specifically emphasise the ‘zeitlich, räumlich und auch im Bezug zum Agenten konkrete Aktivierung eines Systems von religiösen Zeichen, Normen und Praktiken in Situationen, in denen eine solche Aktivierung kulturell vorgesehen oder angemessen ist oder von Individuen als sinnvoll betrachtet wird’.<sup>109</sup> To identify what is culturally established or individually appropriated as religiously significant is of course a matter of context and interpretation, while it is by now accepted that the sharp separation between religious/secular and sacred/profane is by no means a distinction that can be straightforwardly assumed for (and projected onto) ancient cultures. An important consequence of this argument is that sacredness is not something given as inherently associated with a particular object, animal, or phenomenon, rather it is created through use and performance in specifically designed contexts.

Ritual is soon implicated in the process, being an essential (though not exclusive) component of religious traditions. As a well-established subject in a large number of research fields concerned with the study of (ancient) religions, cultures, and societies, ritual has been variously addressed, with no shared consensus as to how to define or use the category.<sup>110</sup> For the purposes of the present analysis, following Catherine Bell, ritual is understood as an action that is strategically separated from normal activities. Viewed as practice, ritual ‘is always contingent, provisional, and defined by difference’.<sup>111</sup> More aptly, she proposes to focus on ‘ritualisation’ as a strategic way of acting that produces, within any given culture, a qualitative distinction from, and a privileged position among, other ways of acting.<sup>112</sup> As a consequence, ‘[f]rom the perspective of ritualization the categories of sacred and profane appear in a different light. Ritualization appreciates how sacred and profane activities are differentiated in the performing of them, and thus how ritualization gives rise to (or creates) the sacred as such by virtue of its sheer differentiation from the profane’.<sup>113</sup>

Ritual(ised) activity is thus creative and transformative, affecting reality and creating meaning through performance before any verbal formulation is attached to it. This viewpoint outlines a perspective that situates practice at the centre, while the articulation of an interpretive position and discourse stands as a secondary development. In other words, ‘we have to agree with the premise of practice theory that ritual activity is not a secondary aspect of religion (subordinate to beliefs, which would be primary), but that is central’.<sup>114</sup> Accordingly, adopting practice as a focusing lens means approaching ‘animal worship’ as a multifaceted, dynamic field of religious actions and not just as a static object of theological speculations, looking at ‘was dieser in der Praxis ist und bedeutet’ and acknowledging that ‘*die in Bild und Text überlieferten Deutungen nur sekundäre Elaborationen sind, die ihren Sinn nicht aus sich selbst, sondern aus der Bindung an eben jene Praxis gewinnen*’.<sup>115</sup>

<sup>107</sup> Bell 1992; 1997.

<sup>108</sup> Bell 1992: 81-88; 1997:81.

<sup>109</sup> Fitzenreiter 2004: 24.

<sup>110</sup> The bibliography on the subject is thus extensive. An exhaustive presentation of ritual studies, with a programmatic focus on theoretical aspects and key analytical concepts, is offered in Kreinath, Snoek and Stausberg 2006. For a general overview, see also Stephenson 2015. Bell 1992, 1997 develops a focused discussion on practice. For an archaeological perspective, see Fogelin 2007; Insohl 2004; 2011.

<sup>111</sup> Bell 1992: 91.

<sup>112</sup> Bell 1992: 88-93; 1997: 81-82.

<sup>113</sup> Bell 1992: 91.

<sup>114</sup> Verhoeven 2011: 125-126.

<sup>115</sup> Fitzenreiter 2003a: 27.

A focus on religious practice is analytically useful for reassessing concepts and terms of discussion and does not restrict investigation to any presumed fixed content or social context, exploring modes of action belonging to both spheres of official (temple/royal) cults and ‘practical religion’<sup>116</sup> (more concerned with problems of everyday life). More specifically, this change implies a different way to look at the sources, not just in terms of (and search for) explicitly, textually attested univocal meanings about animals as gods or symbols of gods, but rather in terms of how every single piece of evidence (texts, images, objects) and larger configurations articulate those ritualised strategies by means of which a certain animal presence is manipulated and constructed as a meaningful focus of religious experience. The latter point, of course, implicates a more focused consideration of the character and distribution of the material, as well as of conventions and rules of display.

### 1.4.3 *The historical dimension: display and decorum*

The sources for investigating practices of ‘animal worship’ are for a large part indirect and sparse, especially with regard to the early periods addressed in the present study. The core evidence is textual and pictorial, while widespread participation in these practices gain stronger visibility in the archaeological record only from the New Kingdom, and is attested on a larger scale in the subsequent Late and Graeco-Roman periods.

Our understanding of the modes, contexts, and (animal) referents of relevant religious actions is therefore inevitably mediated by images and texts, which refigure them as themes of pictorial representations and inscriptions. With this limitation in mind, analysis of the available evidence allows us not just to have a grasp of the Egyptian characterisation of sacr(alis)ed animals and related activities (*infra* § 6.5.1), but also to make a more nuanced interpretation of their historical development. In this regard, particular attention is given to the incorporation, elaboration, and display of such practices within the formalised contexts of pharaonic ‘high culture’ (stone architecture, visual scenes, hieroglyphic writing, inscribed religious texts, etc.) i.e., those domains of cultural production marked by a high degree of formalisation and exclusiveness.<sup>117</sup> The system, which Jan Assmann refers to as ‘monumental discourse’ – ‘the medium through which the state made both itself and its eternal order visible’<sup>118</sup> – exhibited a strong integration of art and writing and was centred around the values of the inner élite, while its organisation (in terms of both form and content) was regulated by the principles of what John Baines terms as ‘decorum’:<sup>119</sup>

The decorum found on the monuments, which can be traced from the late predynastic times, is a set of rules and practices defining what may be represented pictorially with captions, displayed, and possibly written down, in which context and in what form. It (...) was probably based ultimately on rules or practices of conduct and etiquette of spatial separation and religious avoidance.<sup>120</sup>

Decorum is one means by which people negotiate relations among themselves, between themselves and the royal, and also between themselves and the divine – a connection that is largely presented as passing through the royal.<sup>121</sup>

In brief, decorum affected what was deemed as appropriate for public presentation, and operated through hierarchisation and exclusion, especially limiting the access to religious display in non-royal contexts. While deeply rooted in Egyptian social and cultural forms, and characterised by a strong normative value, decorum – Baines remarks – ‘has a history’; the system went through some crucial changes at certain moments in time, which resulted in a long-term weakening of

<sup>116</sup>Baines 1987; 1991.

<sup>117</sup>The topic of Egyptian ‘high culture’, its context and products, is variously addressed in Baines 2007; 2013: 1–20. Baines and Yoffee 1998: 233–252 offer an early theoretical account with a comparative focus on 3rd millennium Egypt and Mesopotamia.

<sup>118</sup>Assmann 2011: 149–154 (150).

<sup>119</sup>Baines 1990; 2007: 14–29.

<sup>120</sup>Baines 1990: 20; 2007: 15.

<sup>121</sup>Baines 2007: 17.

its constraints.<sup>122</sup> However, Baines maintains that ‘the general effect of decorum was probably to slow the proliferation of religious material in public contexts. A subject would not be displayed on monuments simply because it existed in society. Most subjects must have existed for long periods before contexts were created or forms devised for presenting them within the system of decorum’.<sup>123</sup>

Analytically, the concept of decorum reminds us of what might have been left outside the monumental presentation and prompts us to reflect upon gaps and distortions, including these factors in modern reconstruction. This point raises issues of social access to the modes and contexts of display as well as of chronological distribution and preservation of the sources, which are both relevant for our research.

The sparse and fragmentary character of the evidence before the New Kingdom does not apparently require (or inspire) discussion. The extant material has been incorporated within a traditional view of linear development that, perhaps also under the implicit influence of an organic analogy, interprets ‘animal worship’ (with its typical configuration of animal burials) as a later occurrence, and possibly one that arose from times of decline and decay of traditional religious forms. While such a development is possible, specific animal figures (single individuals and groups) are presented as a meaningful focus of both religious action and display since the Early Dynastic, though only indirectly. It is therefore problematic to see the proliferation of late monumentalised animal cults as a dramatic innovation documenting only new tendencies of reinforcement of self-identity. Rather, it is here argued that: (1) early pictorial and written sources relate, often in complex and not straightforward ways, to an actual field of lived religious activities; (2) practices of ‘animal worship’ were present at all times but found limited visibility in the early monumental record for reasons of decorum, while of course forms and focuses of religious action did not remain identical and changes in beliefs may have contributed to developing new patterns; (3) by looking at the modes and times of the monumentalisation of these practices – their integration within highly formalised media and contexts of monumental scale – it is possible to model sources in meaningful configurations and to arrange them in a diachronic perspective, tracing continuities and caesuras.<sup>124</sup>

By referring to the crucial aspects of monumental culture and decorum, the point that is accentuated is not much about accumulating evidence, however valuable new discoveries and finer interpretations of extant sources might be, as about presenting a general framework for approaching that material in relation to its historical and social dimension, and discussing the implications in terms of religious activities.

In brief, the view defended in this study is that ‘animal worship’ represents a dynamic and multifaceted field of Egyptian religious practice that cannot be confined to one particular period, but is differently attested in the archaeological and textual record, while patterns of evidence relate to broad historical developments. This move is not meant to demote the strong impact produced by the outburst of animal cults during the 1st millennium BC. On the contrary, as it will appear at the end of this work, it allows us to set those later expansions within a wider and more nuanced chronological framework, and therefore to reconstruct ‘animal worship’ as a historical movement of *longue durée*.

<sup>122</sup> Baines 2007: 20–25.

<sup>123</sup> Baines 1991: 138.

<sup>124</sup> See Colonna 2017: 110.

#### 1.4.4 'Animal worship': designing an Alternative Model

The conceptual background outlined in the previous sections can be summarised and formalised schematically in the diagram illustrated in Figure 1.3. The theoretical dimensions so far discussed – historical-religious method (§ 1.4.1); ritual theory (§ 1.4.2); decorum and monumental display (§ 1.4.3) – combine into an alternative approach to the strategy pursued by the 'Standard Model', which sets practice at the core of interpretation and articulates discussion through these three perspectives. (1) The historical-religious method pays explicit attention to the problems of definitions and category formations, and asks for a critical interrogation of the sources while looking at religious phenomena as active historical processes. (2) Ritual theory is concerned with doing and strategic ways of acting (ritualisation) as particularly effective (transformative) in the creation of meaningful distinctions (like between ordinary and sacred animals) and here is used in the attempt to trace ritual(ised) actions in the extant material record. (3) display and decorum look at how religious practices are adapted and presented on monumental media, within formal contexts of visual and written expression.

The claim of this study is that Egyptian 'animal worship' can be more positively investigated from these perspectives, namely by considering the biased history of the current notion and the conditions for the construction of an effective heuristic category that matches historical data and strengthen scientific discussion; by exploring the modes and circumstances of ritual mobilisation of a selected animal presence; and by analysing the thematisation of those actions in images and texts, with particular regard to the historical conditions and limits of their monumental display. The model so designed – it is argued – stimulates a more serious engagement with the sources, both analytically, challenging intuitive interpretations with an explicit focus on the practical ways of constructing animals as religiously significant agents, and chronologically, examining changes and developments in the monumentalised forms of 'animal worship' within the frame of 'high culture' and decorum.

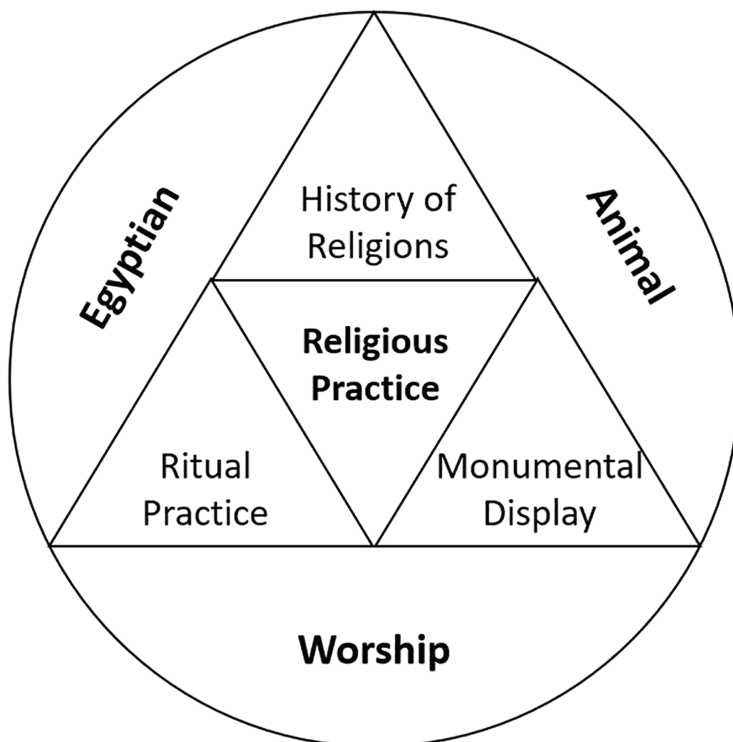


Figure 1.3. Diagram illustrating the conceptual background of the 'Alternative Model'.



Methodologically, two further remarks need to be made explicit to better qualify the approach just described in relation to the state and character of the available evidence. As already noted, the material for investigating practices of ‘animal worship’ is sparse and fragmentary from periods before the New Kingdom, and increases significantly only in the following periods. This situation leaves room for the possibility to use analogies and combine sources (especially textual sources) from later, better-known times in order to elucidate earlier evidence. This in turn raises the question of whether or not it is legitimate to extrapolate and project later well-documented ideas into earlier periods. The procedure appears as attractive as dangerous since the meanings associated with concepts and actions are not static but continuously renegotiated, nuanced, or recreated over time. So, in linking superficially similar but chronologically distant contexts one runs the risk of constructing an artificial impression of continuity in which historical variation and development are overlooked, if not entirely misunderstood. Emphasising, as it is done here, that practices of ‘animal worship’ (not to mention specific individual figures, like the Apis bull) are not limited to the later stages of Egyptian civilisation but can be acknowledged as present and, to a certain extent, significant already in earlier times does not mean assuming any automatic correspondence or uniformity in their forms and contents (e.g., ideological characterisation or funerary traditions), and even less understanding the earlier contexts as mere (and less clear) antecedents of later manifestations.

This argument relates to the broader issue of alleged survivals within a given cultural and religious system. The notion of ‘survival’, developed within the frame of evolutionism, designates a fact, phenomenon, or feature that outlives the historical conditions of its formation and remains as a marginal fossil in later traditions. Under the (tacit) influence of these evolutionary positions, Egyptology, as discussed above (§ 1.3.3), often presents (more or less explicitly) ‘animal worship’ as an archaic substratum originating in prehistoric times – what would be demonstrated mainly by predynastic animal burials – and surviving hidden from official religion until its vigorous (re) appearance in much later times, following what has been suggestively labelled as a ‘retrograde movement’. In a general historical perspective, the limit of this position is double: on the one hand, it scarcely considers the chronological gap between the late phenomenon its supposed antecedents; on the other, it takes a retrospective approach that while reductively viewing late animal cults as odd relics of an archaic religiosity, also indulges in reading early practices in the light of later traditions (including Classical literary accounts).

The historical-religious method is again helpful in overcoming these shortcomings and redressing a more balanced picture. In criticising the idea of ‘survivals’ as inert fossils that almost passively persist within a culture, and replacing it with the concept of ‘reworkings’ that are actively (re) shaped to adapt to the everchanging needs and conditions of society, it puts the accent on the creative quality of historical dynamics, which continuously model and enrich religious traditions (features, practices, etc.) as long as they remain meaningful to that culture, and thus on the relevance of a real diachronic perspective for interpretation. The claim is to reconsider and restore the direction of historical processes. Accordingly, the present study adopts a prospective view that attempts to follow and situate the unfolding of practices of ‘animal worship’ both horizontally, within the specific social and historical contexts of their material configurations, and vertically, with regard to the identification of broad lines and patterns of development through time.

This view combines, finally, with a critical assessment of the material basis of our understanding of ‘animal worship’, especially in early periods, one that reflects on the formation and preservation of extant sources and points at gaps and limitations in our knowledge. In brief, an approach that suits the lacunary nature of our evidence. Considerations of decorum and distribution of evidence play a crucial part in this regard, and discussion must inevitably proceed through calibrated hypotheses that aim at producing better explanations of the present documentary situation rather than emphatic presentations or even judgemental views that take the surviving material as truly representative of the phenomenon addressed.

The final result will not be an overarching narrative or a unifying retrospective overview, but a broad conceptual framework that presupposes a recurrent domain of religious action and belief, of which sparse and fragmentary traces have been preserved. In the former case, early evidence can only count (at best) as an antecedent to the well-established (late) core of the narrative; in the latter, instead, it can be used to formulate a wider historiographic scenario into which these and new data can be fitted (*infra* § 6.5.2).

Overall, the approach propounded by the 'Alternative Model' sets a dividing line between a narrative that strives for a description of 'animal worship' in its clearest expressions at the expense of its historical development, and a general, even imperfect interpretive frame that tries to model patterns and gaps in our material. Very likely, therefore, early sources of 'animal worship' should not be read as documenting singular, isolated episodes but understood as pointers of a more articulated (but for a long period only partially attested) arena of religious practice.