




ABOVE: Anubis, the jackal-headed god who oversaw embalming and protected travelers in ancient Egypt. Detail from a diorite statue at the Temple of Luxor, reign of Amenophis III (1403–1365 BCE). Photo by FOST/Alamy.



# SACRED ANIMAL CULTS IN EGYPT

*Excavating the Catacombs  
of Anubis at Saqqara*

BY SALIMA IKRAM AND PAUL NICHOLSON

A RECENT EXCAVATION AT SAQQARA, EGYPT, is exposing an ancient bustling economy associated with pilgrims and animal cults. Catacombs dedicated to offerings for the god Anubis have revealed huge numbers of mummified dogs, purchased to obtain the god's favor. The study of these remains allows Egyptologists to interpret the impact religion had on local culture and the economy.



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ANYONE WHO IS INTERESTED IN ANCIENT EGYPT KNOWS THAT THE EGYPTIANS MUMMIFIED MANY TYPES OF ANIMALS INCLUDING DOGS, CATS, RAMS, BIRDS, AND CROCODILES. THEY MIGHT HAVE EVEN HEARD OF SACRED ANIMAL CULTS.

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THESE CULTS FOCUSED on an animal that was thought to house the soul of a god during its lifetime, and was revered until its death, when it was mummified with the soul migrating to another similarly marked creature. The best-known example is the Apis Bull, though other gods, such as the Khnum Ram of Elephantine, and the Cat of Bastet, were also prominent. However few people realize the scale of these cults and the role they played in the ancient economy and in personal belief.

While there was only one Apis Bull alive at any given time and his death was an occasion for national mourning and royal ritual, many millions of other animals

received much less lavish burial, although they played a key role in personal piety. These were the votive animal mummies dedicated by pilgrims at sacred sites such as Saqqara, Bubastis, and Tuna el-Gebel (to name but a few), in the hope that the mummy, having been given a fitting burial, would intercede with the god and bring good fortune to the donor. As shown in the book, *Divine Creatures: Animal Mummies from Ancient Egypt*, these votive mummies account for most of the millions of mummified cats, dogs, ibises, and falcons that occupy catacombs throughout Egypt.

### The Increasing Importance of Animal Cults

Animal cults are as old as Egyptian civilization, with the Apis attested as early as the First Dynasty (ca. 3100 BCE), but it is from the 6th century BCE that they really seem to grow in scale and to become an important part of Egypt's economy. By the 30th Dynasty, at the end of native rule in Egypt (380 BCE), the animal cults appear to take on a new significance. They can be seen as an attempt to return to traditional core values and in doing so are a way of reinforcing "Egyptianness" at a time when the country was increasingly being drawn into



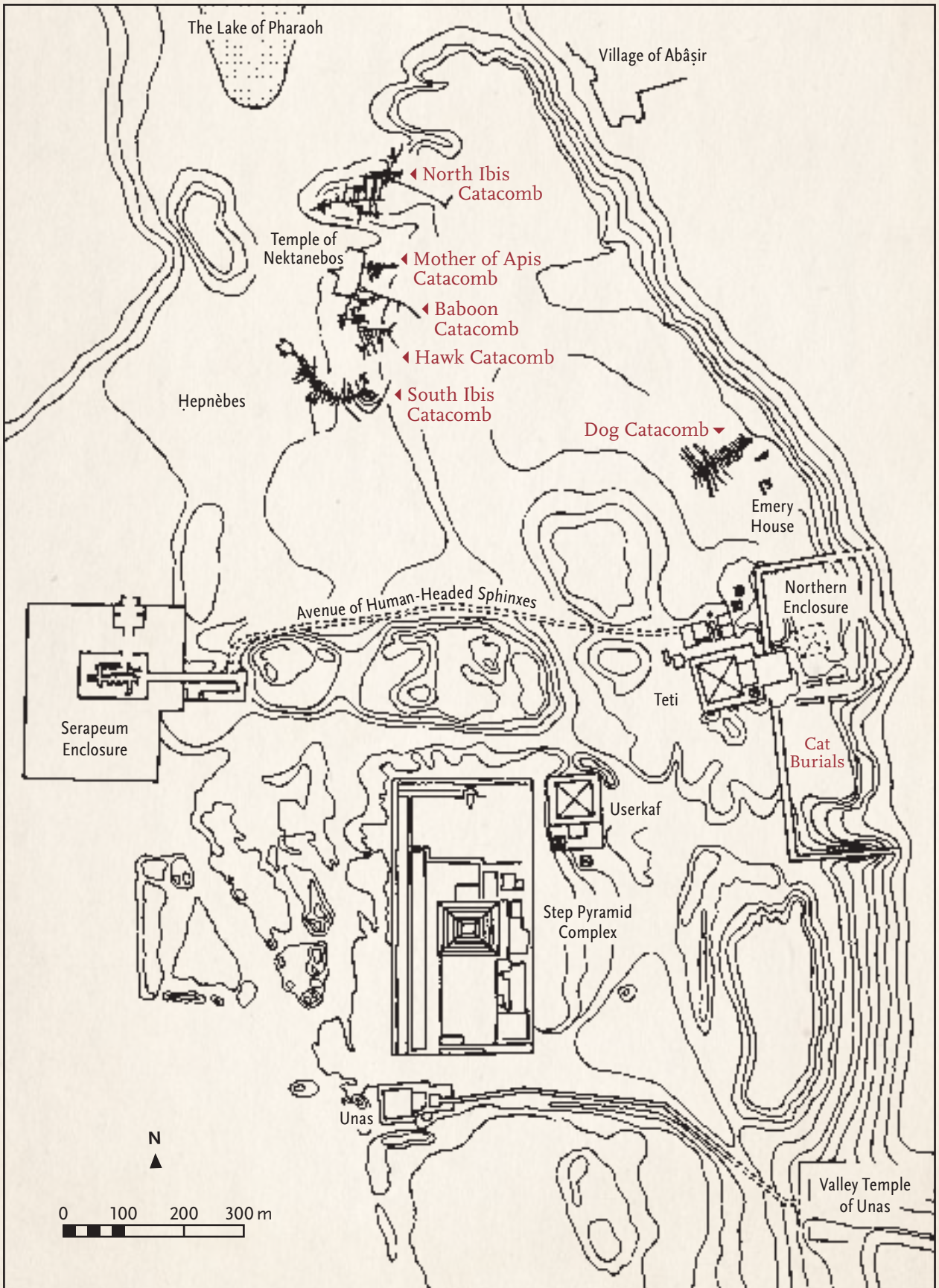
TOP LEFT: Amulet of the god Anubis. Photo by the Wellcome Library, London, Wikimedia. LEFT: The mummy of a Sacred Ram (CG 29861) from Elephantine, now in the Egyptian Museum. Elephantine was one of two sites with a temple dedicated to Khnum, God of the source of the Nile, who was usually depicted with a ram's head. Photo by Anna-Marie Kellen, in cooperation with the Egyptian Museum, Cairo.



ABOVE: The iconic Step Pyramid at Saqqara, Egypt. Many Sacred Animal catacombs are located in the surrounding area. Photo from Wikimedia.

RIGHT: A bright blue faience amulet depicting a cat surrounded by kittens, representing Bastet. PM object E3302. FAR RIGHT: A bronze figure of the Apis Bull. Between his horns is a sun-disk combined with a *uraeus* (cobra serpent). Photo by the Walters Art Museum, Wikimedia.





## Anubis Rituals

Two depictions of the jackal-headed Anubis, a funerary god associated with mummification/embalming. The object on the left may have been used as a mask by priests during rituals associated with the mummification process. Notice the slits cut in the clay just under the jackal's head, which allowed the priest to see. Photo from the Pelizaeus-Museum Hildesheim, object #1585. Photo on far right courtesy of Harrogate Museums and Arts, Wikimedia.



the Mediterranean world and had already been caught up in the power struggles between Greece and Persia. They also provide a means of more intimate and immediate contact between gods and people—certainly reassuring in troubled times.

Given the apparent importance of the animal cults, it is perhaps surprising that they have not enjoyed greater research. Most work at the sites has concentrated on temples and shrines rather than on the animals themselves or the catacombs in which they were interred. While the archaeology of the cult temples and shrines is clearly important, it is only part of the story; for the pilgrims who were coming to these sanctuaries, the votive mummies and their consecration and interment was of crucial significance. Thus, the authors have been involved in a Cardiff University (UK) project to examine the dog catacombs, The Catacombs of Anubis at Saqqara.

Although best known for the Step Pyramid, Saqqara is also the site of vast numbers of animal catacombs and shrines, including the burial place of the Apis Bulls, the Serapeum. In the 1960s, Professor W.B. Emery unearthed the burial places of ibises, hawks, baboons, and cows on the west of the Saqqara plateau not far from the Serapeum. These complemented the burials of cats and

dogs that were already known on the east side. Despite the rich trove of animal mummies buried in complicated catacombs, the excavators of the time focused mainly on monumental architecture and inscriptions, overlooking a rich source of information about the culture, religion, and technology of the ancient Egyptians.

### Current Research on the Canine Catacombs

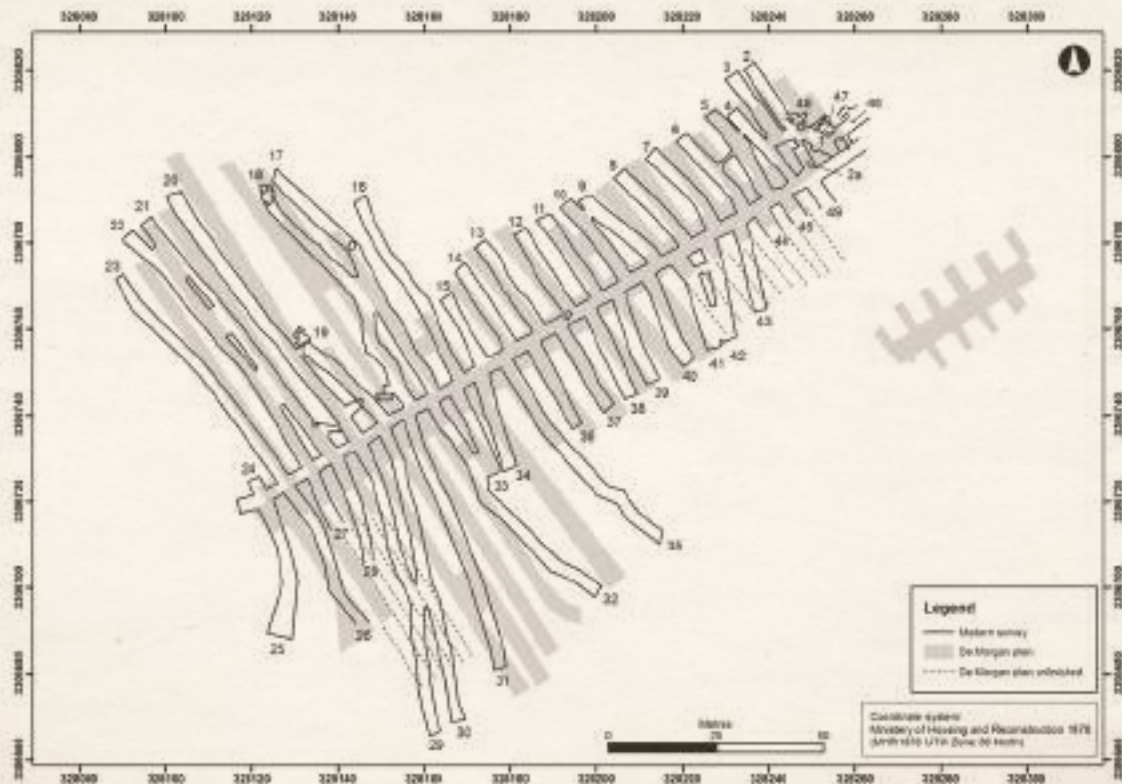
The Catacombs of Anubis project has attempted to examine the cult from a modern archaeological perspective, by studying the catacombs in terms of their construction and layout and analyzing the animal remains and how they were mummified. The information garnered from these studies is examined in light of textual and representational evidence, in an effort to understand the significance of the cults to the pilgrims and in the economy.

There are not one but two canine catacombs at Saqqara, located side by side on the east of the plateau and dedicated to the god Anubis who oversaw embalming and protected travelers. The southernmost of these catacombs is much smaller than its northern



OPPOSITE: Map of North Saqqara showing the positions of the different animal catacombs located there (highlighted in red). After J. Hodges.

RIGHT: The mummified head and neck of an adult dog unearthed in the catacombs at Saqqara. Photo by Paul Nicholson.



ABOVE: Modern survey plan of the Dog Catacombs on De Morgan's 1897 plan. Plan by Scott Williams, Steve Mills, and Hendrikje Nouwens.

neighbor, measuring about 45 m east-west by 25 m north-south (148 x 82 feet), as recorded on a plan published by Jacques de Morgan in 1897. Thus far, we have been unable to gain access to this catacomb and it is likely that it has largely collapsed due to earthquakes in the region. However, the northern catacomb is some 173 m east-west by 140 m north-south (568 x 459 feet) and has individual burial galleries up to 30 m (almost 100 feet) in length, much longer than the 7 to 10 m of its partner. This larger catacomb is the focus of our investigations.

The key given on de Morgan's map suggested that both catacombs dated to the New Kingdom (ca. 16th to 11th century BCE), but we have found no evidence for this dating in the larger of the pair and it is unclear on what he based his view. However, it is likely that the smaller catacomb is the earlier of the two, succeeded by the larger one, perhaps in the 5th to 4th century BCE as animal cults began to increase in popularity. Careful re-surveying of the monument has shown that the western end of the larger catacomb has the longest burial tunnels and appears to be an addition to the original plan. Presumably this second phase of the catacomb represents

the height of the cult, requiring an enlargement of the original structure.

Like the other animal catacombs on the west side of the plateau, the larger dog catacomb cuts through the burial chambers of a number of earlier tombs of officials. The shafts of these tombs were probably used as a convenient way of introducing light and fresh air into the monument during the tunneling process. They would then be blocked once the work was complete. It is not impossible that the tunnellers sometimes worked from an existing burial chamber toward the axial aisle—though this is less clear in the dog catacomb than in some of the other animal catacombs. Clearly there was an understanding and knowledge of the subterranean world of chambers and tunnels at Saqqara.

Once constructed, the monument was gradually filled with mummified dogs. But where did they come from and how often were they deposited here? Frustratingly we do not know the start and end dates for the use of the monument and so cannot say with certainty how many animals would be needed each year in order to fill it. However, calculations based on the size of the monu-



ABOVE: Scott Williams worked with Hendrikje Nouwens (not pictured) surveying the catacombs. Photo by Paul Nicholson.

ment and the depth of the extant mummified remains in conjunction with 15 liter samples suggest that it may originally have contained up to 8,000,000 animals. Even allowing for a duration of 400 to 500 years for these to accumulate, thousands would have been dedicated annually.

Our analysis shows that most of these animals were young, often neonates of only days or weeks of age, and these must surely have been procured specifically for the cult. While a temple to Anubis existed at Saqqara and doubtless held dogs as representatives of Anubis, it is unlikely to have served as the main breeding center for the animals; they must have been bred elsewhere. One must assume that there were a number of “puppy farms” operating around Memphis and that these establishments served to provide most of the animals for burial. “Puppy farm” is today an emotive term, but one should not see the cult through modern eyes. It must be recalled that the aim of the dedication was to provide a representative of the god with a burial that was fitting in the hope that the animal would then act on behalf of the donor and would relay messages to the god. One trusts that it

would not do to have treated the animal improperly. It is unknown whether the pilgrims were aware that their dedications were often only days old when they were chosen as sacrifices and cursorily mummified. If they were, then it may have been something that was deliberately “overlooked” for the greater good of the animal and its donor—after all, the deceased animal lived forever with its patron deity.

### **Embalming and Dedicating Dog Mummies**

Most probably, embalmer priests carried out the mummification of the animals, providing a source of income for the temple. The amount of natron needed to desiccate thousands of creatures and the amount of oils and resins needed to anoint them would have been considerable, and would have played a significant role in the economy and trade patterns both within Egypt as well as abroad. That said, many of the small puppies buried in the catacomb may simply have been desiccated in the hot sun and on the desert sand and so received no elaborate treatment.

No doubt pilgrims visited the temple and may have made arrangements with priests for the dedication of





LEFT: A photo showing one of the galleries filled with disintegrating dog mummies. ABOVE: Some of the dogs buried here would have been Sacred Animals, manifestations of Anubis, and these might have been buried in coffins set inside niches such as this one being examined by Salima Ikram. Photos by Paul Nicholson.

a dog mummy in the catacomb. However, we do not know whether they assumed that what they would be paying for was a full-grown animal like those they saw at the temple, nor indeed whether they actually saw the mummy at all. We know from the *Archive of Hor*, a series of texts relating to the ibis cult, that mass-burials took place for the ibis annually and if the same were true for the dogs it is quite possible that a donor would not be present at the event. His or her votive mummy might simply have been paid for and stored until that time, when the prayer would be activated.

In short, this new work, focusing on the animals and their burial places, raises new questions about the place of the cults in the lives of pilgrims, while the scale of these offerings, which are unexpectedly large in the case of the dogs, forces one to concentrate on just how the animals were obtained and mummified, and the impact that they had on the Egyptian economy. ●

**SALIMA IKRAM, PH.D.**, is Distinguished University Professor of Egyptology at the American University in Cairo and has worked on several projects throughout Egypt, many involving animal mummies, including the Animal Mummy Gallery at the Cairo Museum. She has published on diverse subjects including rock art, desert routes, and funerary archaeology.

**PAUL NICHOLSON, PH.D.**, is Professor of Archaeology at Cardiff University (Wales, UK) and the Director of the Catacombs of Anubis Project. In addition to his work at Saqqara, he has also directed several projects related to ceramics, glass, and faience in ancient Egypt and has published on a wide variety of topics.

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#### FOR FURTHER READING

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### Sacred Dog Burials

A range of dog skulls from Gallery 32 in the canine catacombs at Saqqara. Different ages and possibly different breeds were buried here, for the purposes of communicating with Anubis on behalf of people passing into the afterlife. The scale of this find indicates a massive breeding operation for the procurement of offerings to the gods.



