

# **Egyptology & Zoology I**

Animal Behaviour  
and  
Its Reflection in Ancient Egyptian Culture

**Prague, September 23 – 24, 2025**



**CZECH INSTITUTE  
OF EGYPTOLOGY**  
Faculty of Arts  
**Charles University**



# Egyptology & Zoology I

## TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 23

09.00 – 09.30 Registration at the conference venue

09.30 – 09.45 Opening of the conference

09.45 – 10.45 Kristopher Molčan, *The Seth animal: Aardvark (Orycteropus afer) as the initial manifestation of chaos*

10.45 – 11.15 Coffee break

11.15 – 12.00 Jiří Janák, *Above as Below: The representation of the god Seth in the sky*

12.00 – 13.30 Lunch Break

13.30 – 14.15 Mathilde Prévost, *From ecological psychology to zooanthropology: the potential of the notion of “affordance” in Egyptology*

14.15 – 15.00 Renata Landgráfová, *Iufaa’s Serpents: the real and the primordial snakes in the handbooks of the kherep-Selqet priests*

15.00 – 15.30 Coffee Break

15.30 – 16.15 Camilla Persi, *The Vulture Supremacy: A re-evaluation of their significance in ancient Egypt*

**WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 24**

- 09.00 – 09.45 Filip Coppens, *Naming the “River Horse”. Reflections on behavioural and physical designations for the hippopotamus in the Horus temple at Edfu*
- 09.45 – 10.30 Anne-Alia Chenia, *Isdes or Thoth? The baboon as the origin of the correlation between Thoth and Isdes in Graeco-Roman temples*
- 10.30 – 11.00 Coffee Break
- 11.00 – 11.45 Federica Pancin, *Crocodile is as crocodile does. Ontology and agency of the crocodile sign in the hieroglyphic script (with a focus on Ptolemaic writing)*
- 11.45 – 12.30 Diána Kulisz, *Antelopes, gazelles, ibexes, and cattle in ancient Egyptian minor arts*
- 12.30 – 14.00 Lunch Break
- 14.00 – 14.45 Hylke Hetteema, *Ancient Egyptian origin myths for the horse*
- 14.45 – 15.30 Lonneke Delpout, *Looking for reality in ancient Egyptian horse imagery*
- 15.30 – 16.00 Coffee Break
- 16.00 – 16.45 Pim de Klerk, *The concept of the Benu-Bird in ancient Egypt*

## **Isdes or Thoth?**

### **The baboon as the origin of the correlation between Thoth and Isdes in Graeco-Roman temples**

ANNE-ALIA CHENIA

Institut d'égyptologie, Université de Strasbourg

In Ptolemaic temples, especially in Dendara and Edfou, Thoth's name got associated or even replaced with a new epiclesis qualifying him as "*Jsdn*". Isdes (or Isden), a minor god whose name was used to specify one of Thoth's characteristics. This correlation has been explained by the two entities being represented as apes in Hermopolis, resulting in the connection. Considering the ptolemaic sources presenting Isdes as an ape-headed god, the author will explore this association by studying the representations of the two as baboons in the previous historical periods. Moreover, the iconographical and textual data combined with animal ethology will be the occasion to explore the possible origin of the representation of Isdes as a baboon. The author will question whether the ancients represented Isdes as the baboon because of a direct observation of the animal or rather because of a linkage with another deity or mythological aspect.

## **Naming the “River Horse”**

### **Reflections on behavioural and physical designations for the hippopotamus in the Horus temple at Edfu**

FILIP COPPENS

Czech Institute of Egyptology, Charles University Prague

The almost perfectly preserved walls of the monumental temple dedicated to the falcon god Horus at Edfu contain a vast array of scenes depicting the harpooning of the common hippopotamus (*Hippopotamus amphibius*) by a Ptolemaic basileus as well as by Horus himself. Overall, one can observe three specific sets of textual and visual corpora related to this act of annihilation. It concerns two very specific rituals entitled respectively *sm3 db* or “*slaying the hippopotamus*” and *stt (w<sup>c</sup>) r db* or “*casting (the single barbed harpoon) towards the hippopotamus*”. Both these groups are, as many other scenes involving the slaying of animals (such as turtles, crocodiles, donkeys, antelopes etc.), apotropaic in nature and often occur at very specific areas of the temple, providing surplus protection in places prone to assaults of the forces of chaos. The third set consists of a group of reliefs located together over several registers on the interior western side of the temple enclosure wall, depicting the so-called “*Festival of Victory*” (*hb kn.t*) or the triumph of Horus over Seth, with the later frequently portrayed as a hippopotamus (and crocodile).

The inscriptions accompanying the various scenes portraying the harpooning of the hippopotamus provide us with a vast array of different appellations used to designate the animal. Next to a series of names clearly linked to the mythological fight between Horus and Seth (and to a lesser degree Apophis), other terms unmistakably refer to very specific behavioural traits or explicit aspects of the physical appearance of the hippopotamus. The paper aims to provide an insight, understanding and interpretation of the diverse names applied to the animal. Overall, the occurrence of over a dozen of different designations for this “river horse” clearly illustrate how the ancient Egyptians were very keen observers of the world in which they lived and the knowledge the priestly composers had of the hippopotami’s nature and their natural habitat.

## **Looking for reality in ancient Egyptian horse imagery**

LONNEKE DELPEUT

University of Vienna

All images in ancient Egypt are based on reality. It is the question, however, to what extent the images convey reality. This talk will investigate the realistic nature of the depictions of horses in New Kingdom Egypt in terms of content and rendering. First, it will look into the image content of depictions of horses, meaning what is depicted. This studies the realism in terms of how the horse was used in ancient Egyptian society, the horses' coat colour, their behaviour, as well as their display of sex and movement. Secondly, it will look at image rendering, namely how the content is made visible. This studies the realistic nature of the horses' proportions, spatiality, details and shape. The main aim of this presentation will therefore be to show that there are different levels on which the realistic nature of images can be assessed, and to show what type of questions this methodology might help to answer. For example, by showing the difference between the canonical tradition and the artistic freedom enjoyed within, this presentation should also be able to hint at to what extent the images are a reliable source in terms of what the horses looked like, also hinting at what it can tell us about potential breed identification. This solely focuses on image rendering. In terms of content, the images might tell us something about the kind of horses that were used in ancient Egypt, including the possibility of gelded horses. Since image content and rendering are heavily influenced by the images' purpose, this talk will also take into consideration the location of the image and therefore evaluate the source. The scope of this presentation will be images of horses in the New Kingdom in private as well as royal context.

# **Ancient Egyptian origin myths for the horse**

HYLKE HETTEMA

Institute of Area Studies, Leiden University

Part of the history for the Arab horse as narrated by various breed chroniclers perpetuates a story of origin for the breed in ancient Egypt. While the first argumentation is often referencing ancient Egyptian depictions of horses, a deeper narrative is produced by indicating evidence of the Arab horse in the presence of Pharaoh's based on biblical accounts. As I have previously probed the projection of Arab horses onto ancient Egyptian imagery featuring equines with Egyptologist Lonneke Delpeut, for this paper presentation, I propose to analyse the use of biblical narrative to construct a mythological origin for the Arab horse in ancient Egypt. I will showcase the strong Orientalist and Egyptomaniac influence on the development of this particular equine breed discourse, as well as the entanglement of both Christian and Islamic origin stories linking the very domestication of the horse to ancient Egypt.

## **Above as below: The representation of the god Seth in the sky**

JIŘÍ JANÁK

Czech Institute of Egyptology, Charles University Prague

For decades, scholars have been seeking identification of the so-called Seth animal which was connected with the god as his iconographical visualisation from the very beginnings of ancient Egyptian history. Some viewed the animal as the donkey, some as the aardvark, and yet others argued for a purely mythological nature of this animal. This paper focuses on a threefold connection between the Seth animal, the god and Ursa Major, as this constellation (the Great Bear) was frequently linked to Seth in ancient Egyptian religion. If the symbolic, mythological and ritual connections between the god and the animal and between the god and the constellation were as strong, we may presume that there was also a direct symbolic or at least iconographic connection between the Seth animal and Ursa Major. Tracing and analysing such links could offer new insights into the interpretation of both the animal and the constellation in Egyptian religion and culture.

# The concept of the Benu-Bird in ancient Egypt

PIM DE KLERK

DUENE e.V., Partner in the Greifswald mire Centre | Museum of Natural History, Karlsruhe

Within the context of an overview how ancient cultures perceived mires and other wetlands, a study is in progress on the ancient Egyptian Benu-Bird. The bird was since the Middle/New Kingdom depicted as the grey heron (*Ardea cinerea*), a prominent wetland animal. Because of the large size of the Benu-Bird in drawings on various 'Book of the dead' papyri, it has also been assumed that the heron was in fact a relatively large animal. An extinct large heron species of which fossils were found on the Arabian Peninsula was named *Ardea bennuides* after the Benu-Bird, but it is unknown whether the Benu-Bird may in fact have been modelled on the Benu-Heron. It is unclear how the bird was seen previously, although many hypotheses exist that all refer to various wetland birds.

The Benu-Bird was connected to various deities and was often designated as the *ba* of these. The bird was also related to the ancient Egyptian concept of creation, and a well-known story tells how the Benu-bird flew over the primordial waters, landed on the benben-stone that had risen from these waters, and uttered a cry that initiated the creation of the world. However, until now we have not been able to trace the original Egyptian source for this tale. There are, however, references to crying herons in many religious texts, and there is one tale in which the goose "Great Cackler" initiated creation with a scream. The Benu-Bird was also connected to a holy tree in the temple of Heliopolis in which it sat. Some ancient records specify this tree as balanites, others as willow, which both can grow in riverine settings.

Detailed knowledge on the sources that mention or display Benu will provide important insights on how the Egyptians envisaged wetlands within religious context.

# **Antelopes, gazelles, ibexes, and cattle in ancient Egyptian minor arts**

DIÁNA KULISZ

Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest | Eötvös Loránd University

The presentation negotiates on certain species of antelopes, gazelles, ibexes, and cattle perpetuated on ancient Egyptian artefacts, decisively on cosmetic objects, and, in wall paintings/reliefs. I have gathered more than a hundred pieces of antelope-, gazelle-, ibex- or cattle-shaped shallow dishes, and spoons shaped like an antelope-, gazelle- or calf foreleg. I will present my typology on them, which help to make the distinction between the species clearer, and also show the anomalies concerning some objects or object groups which raises questions. I will take into consideration all species living in Egypt at the time of manufacturing and use of these objects, i.e. mainly during the New Kingdom, and make morphological comparisons on their bodily features, such as the horns, physiognomy and body curves.

On the other hand, the presentation will analyse the interpretation, the meaning of these objects. The animal types themselves and the iconography of the dishes are referring to certain characteristics and behaviour of either species, while also evoking direct mythological associations, and, bear important connection to medical remedies, known recipes, and well-known sacrificial activities connected to the mortuary sphere and also to the temples. It is also important in this respect to analyse the substances, such as pigments, ointments, balms stored in these utensils. The artefacts were used in the everyday life, but were also put in tomb context, so their owner – either a woman or a man – could be made more attractive with the help of these accessories, thus induce erotic activities and childbirth, or regeneration and rebirth after death. But, substance remains in these objects are proofs that these dishes were definitely used during sacrificial activities too in sanctuaries and temples, by the daily rituals and offerings.

It is also interesting to note, that although diagnostic features of these animals are important, there are common aspects about them, which put them to a joint group where certain connotations can be connected to either species.

**Iufaa's Serpents:  
the real and the primordial snakes in the handbooks of the *khrep-Selqet*  
priests**

RENATA LANDGRÁFOVÁ

Czech Institute of Egyptology, Charles University Prague

Since the discovery of the shaft tomb of Iufaa at Abusir West, Egyptologists have had two handbooks of the *khrep-Selqet* priest at their disposal. The one of Papyrus Brooklyn 47.218.48 and .85 (Sauneron 1989) contains the description of 25 snakes, how likely they are to bite, and ways of treating the effects of their venom. The text of Iufaa's western wall of the burial chamber is an initiation handbook of the priest with descriptions of six sacred primordial snakes, their earthly and heavenly forms and instructions on how to worship them correctly (Landgráfová and Janák 2021). As an ophiologist and physician, the *khrep-Selqet* priest was tasked not just with treating the bites of snakes and other venomous animals, but also with clearing camp- and building sites of their dangers, and as such they had to command vast secular and sacred knowledge. Comparing the two handbooks, the contribution will examine ancient Egyptian knowledge of the serpent world that surrounded them.

**The Seth animal:**  
**Aardvark (*Orycteropus afer*) as the initial manifestation of chaos**

KRISTOPHER MOLČAN

Czech Institute of Egyptology, Charles University Prague

The faunal identity of the ancient Egyptian god Seth has now formed a topic of scholarly discussions for well over a century. The majority of scholars studying the enigmatic creature were in unison to propose that it in fact represents a real animal species identifiable among faunal taxa, yet a unified consensus about which one has so far not been reached. To convincingly identify the animal associated with this deity, the preceding research has mostly lacked a comprehensive set of methods. In particular, not enough attention has been given to two important factors – the early iconographical evidence attested to the Seth animal, and the ethological (*i.e.* behavioural) traits of the given animal candidates in regards to the character of the studied god. The paper therefore strives to analyse the morphological and behavioural analogies that can be found between the animal of Seth and its possible faunal model in nature. This methodology is applied to the aardvark (*Orycteropus afer*), a species whose physiology and habits appear to be in great correspondence with the deity and its animal.

## **Crocodile is as crocodile does.**

### **Ontology and agency of the crocodile sign in the hieroglyphic script (with a focus on Ptolemaic writing)**

FEDERICA PANCIN

Independent researcher

Crocodile is as crocodile does. Ontology and agency of the crocodile sign in the hieroglyphic script (with a focus on Ptolemaic writing). As an image of the world, the hieroglyphic sign notably interprets nature and its phenomena, including Animalia. The hieroglyph of the crocodile (I3) was significantly chosen by Jan Assmann (1994) as a model of materiality of the hieroglyphic signifier, for its paradigmatic iconic and metaphoric properties (“Krokodilizität”). Indeed, the crocodile sign is an image of the reptile and retains semographic functions as an ideogram and as a taxogram. However, the behavioural habits of the animal also inspired analogical interpretations conveyed in metaphorical taxograms, qualifying objects with visual references to the perceived (interpreted) nature of crocodiles – aggressive, angry, swift, voracious, even greedy creatures. Ontology is thus defined by actions, and, in turn, agency becomes pivotal in revealing the essence of the natural world –reflected accordingly in the highly visual language of the Egyptian epigraphic script.

During the Graeco-Roman period, the hieroglyphic writing system largely expanded its repertoire of signifiers and signification: the crocodile sign, too, acquired more meanings, obtained through the exploitation of newly recognised agencies and ontologies of the animal. Great importance was given to the exploration of the relation between the physical world and the supernatural, whose recondite essence could be revealed also by means of writing – the so-called “figurative writing” (Sauneron 1982). Graphemic analogies are highly represented in the textual production of the Egyptian temples, especially in liturgical and mythographical texts, which aim at exposing the metaphysical reality of the world in the frame of ritual. The crocodile is thus more evidently not just a living being – with its biology and its ethology – but also an embodiment of the divine – substantially being divine and acting divinely.

The research aims to present the semiotics of the crocodile sign (I3) in the hieroglyphic script, with a focus on selected epigraphic sources of the Graeco-Roman period. The analysis of the values and uses of this hieroglyph will possibly contribute to shed light on the cultural function of the crocodile figure as interpreted by the ancient Egyptians.

# **The Vulture Supremacy:**

## **A re-evaluation of their significance in ancient Egypt**

CAMILLA PERSI

Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin | Ägyptischen Museums und Papyrussammlung Berlin

Despite recent advancements, Egyptology has frequently been deficient in an interdisciplinary zoological and ethological approach when dealing with animals. This is especially relevant to vultures, whose modern understanding in the field seems to have been profoundly influenced by subsequent historical narratives rather than by ancient Egyptian sources. Through the analysis of specialised literature, field work and collaboration with experts, the significance of vultures in ancient Egyptian society, particularly the Griffon and Lappet-faced vultures, gets to a new level, potentially contesting established facts and prompting new discourses. This study aims to first present the critical points of historical research and perspectives on vultures within Egyptology while also highlighting some innovative approaches (Von Lieven 2024) as well as greatly overlooked viewpoints (Enrich and Ute Winter 1995, 1996). Finally, new insights into this bird of prey will be discussed, ranging from its local significance in ElKab to its relationship with the dead.

# **From ecological psychology to zooanthropology: the potential of the notion of “affordance” in Egyptology**

MATHILDE PRÉVOST

Institut français d'archéologie orientale

Explaining an association between a concept and an animal by its appearance, its behaviour or its use by a society is neither new nor rare in Egyptology. Some difficulties arise, however, when the same species appears to be used in ancient Egypt to convey seemingly contradictory images. For example, the lion is sometimes identified as the king, sometimes as his enemies or as evil forces in general; a goose can be presented as a harmful beast or as a cherished creature. In these cases, it can be interesting to use a conceptual tool which was proposed by the Classical philologist and anthropologist Maurizio Bettini in the 1990s. The word “affordance” was first used in ecological psychology by James Gibson in the 1960s-1970s; it refers to the potentialities offered to a living being by its environment, and which lead to an instinctive action from his part when they respond to a need, or “project” – for example, the tongue of a frog will leave its mouth if the animal is hungry and has spotted something in its surroundings that could serve as food, such as a fly. Bettini proposed applying this concept to the field of history of representations, asserting that human beings spot affordances in their environment in the same way and also use them when they need to express an abstract idea through language, images and rites.

In the case of animals, such affordances, or potentialities, can be found in their morphological and behavioural traits, as well as in their interactions with human society. This paper aims to demonstrate, through some case studies, how, and to what extent, the concept of affordance can be beneficial when used in Egyptological research regarding animal representations. It can help researchers to characterize the complexity of the image of an animal species in ancient Egypt and better explain it. The important notion of a project also helps to explain how the same society can use one species to express very different, sometimes even paradoxical, notions: this impression can come from several texts whose authors use a different “affordance”, or simply have a different “project”.