

Taweret: Protector of Fertility, Pregnancy, and Childbirth

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In ancient Egypt, the gods were looked to for answers on life's difficult questions and for protection from danger. Since pregnancy and childbirth posed significant risks in the ancient world, the Egyptians appealed to their gods to protect women, pregnancies, and newborn children. Taweret was one deity the ancient Egyptians could turn to for protection. In her hybrid hippopotamus, crocodile, lion form,¹ Taweret was worshipped in the home and found on a plethora of items meant to protect women and children during their most vulnerable times.

The ancient Egyptians deeply valued family but bringing children into the world was dangerous. Pregnant women and childbirth were rarely depicted in Egyptian art, and few texts mention pregnancy and birth. It seems the Egyptians avoided depicting and discussing these fraught scenarios. Miscarriage, early, late, or prolonged labor could all bring harm to mothers and their babies.² Even when a mother and child survived labor, threats abounded. Archaeological data suggests that roughly half of the children born in ancient Egypt did not survive past age five and women died at a rate of 2:1 to their male counterparts in their childbearing years.³

Seeking protection, the Egyptians called on Taweret. Since she was a protector of the home and women and children, most of the worship occurred in people's houses. Women prayed to statuettes of Taweret and asked her to fend off evil and harm their houses, bodies, and their children. Women and children could also wear amulets of Taweret to keep her protection close.⁴

Figures of Taweret were not the only way the goddess was represented; her image has been found on many different magical items from the homes of the Egyptians. She can be seen wielding her knives of protection on things such as beds and headrests. Emblazoning her image on these types of objects was believed to bring her divine protection to her supplicants as they slept. Taweret also appeared on ritual implements like magical wands. These wands, commonly produced in the Middle Kingdom, were made of hippopotamus ivory.⁵ With inscriptions like "protection of day" and "protection of night," they were likely used to carve out ritual space to protect infants and children while in the home, possibly even as they slept.⁶

Taweret was a very powerful goddess who protected mothers and children during pregnancy and birth. Egyptian women worshiped her in hopes of smooth pregnancies and deliveries, and to protect their children as they grew.

¹ The Metropolitan Museum of Art, "Taweret Amulet," accessed April 7, 2025, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/550913>

² Gay Robins, "Women & Children in Peril. Pregnancy, Birth & Infant Mortality in Ancient Egypt," *KMT: a modern journal of Ancient Egypt* 5, no. 4 (1995): 24-35.

³ Robins, "Women & Children in Peril. Pregnancy, Birth & Infant Mortality in Ancient Egypt," 24-35.

⁴ Robins, "Women & Children in Peril. Pregnancy, Birth & Infant Mortality in Ancient Egypt," 24-35.

⁵ Hippopotamuses were seen as very powerful protectors of their young in ancient Egypt; the fact that wands were made out of their tusks strengthened their symbolic powers of protection.

⁶ The Metropolitan Museum of Art, "Apotropaic Wand," accessed April 7, 2025, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/545740>

Further Reading!

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