

## Egyptian Jackal Gods and Religious Syncretism

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When you encounter a figure of a jackal-headed man from ancient Egypt in a museum, it is most often identified as the god Anubis. Figures and amulets of the canid deity were commonly produced in ancient Egypt for safe passage to the afterlife. However, Anubis is not the only jackal god from ancient Egypt. Thus, our small Anubis statuette from the Art Museum of the University of Memphis raises an intriguing question: Is this statuette truly Anubis, or could it represent Wepwawet, a lesser-known jackal-headed god? Although we may not be able to answer definitively, the visual and functional similarities between these two deities invite a closer look at how they emerged from local traditions and were later amalgamated through a process known as religious syncretism.

Before Egypt became a unified state around 3150 BCE, it was a collection of independent regions and communities, each with distinct customs and local gods. In this diverse environment, similar deities like Anubis and Wepwawet developed in different areas. The White Chapel of Senusret I,<sup>1</sup> a 12th Dynasty monument, links Anubis to the 17th Upper Egyptian nome (district) and Wepwawet to the 13th, perhaps highlighting the canid deities' regional origins.

Looking at early archaeological evidence, we find dogs or jackals buried in Predynastic cemeteries. Some of these animals were interred beside human graves, while others were found in clusters between graves. Most telling, some of these canid remains have been found buried along cemetery edges. Researcher Mary Hartley suggests these burials served a protective function, linking jackals to the protection of the dead.<sup>2</sup>

It is not surprising that more than one location in Egypt would have worshipped canid deities as guardians of the cemetery and the afterlife. Jackals were common scavengers and often found near burial sites. The ancient Egyptians may have viewed the animals as both a threat to and protectors of the cemetery, leading to jackal figures being used in funerary symbolism and protective magic. These beliefs in the power and protection of the jackal secured their place of reverence at the local level and manifested in gods like Anubis and Wepwawet.

With political unification, Egypt merged regional deities into a shared pantheon. Rather than erasing local identities, syncretism preserved and intertwined them, allowing gods like Anubis and Wepwawet to coexist and blend, often into one. Our museum's Anubis statuette serves as a small but powerful reminder of this process, symbolizing how diverse local beliefs and protective magic merged to shape the national religious identity of ancient Egypt.

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<sup>1</sup> "Provinces of Egypt," University College London, accessed April 3, 2025, <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/museums-static/digitalegypt/geo/index.html>

<sup>2</sup> Mary Louise Hartley, "The Significance of Predynastic Canid Burials in Ancient Egypt," *Archeo-Nil* no. 25, (2015): 57-74, [https://www.persee.fr/doc/arnil\\_1161-0492\\_2015\\_num\\_25\\_1\\_1089](https://www.persee.fr/doc/arnil_1161-0492_2015_num_25_1_1089)

### Further Reading!

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