

The Great One: Taweret's Role in Ancient Egyptian Life

Audrey Rollen

Taweret, whose name means “The Great One,” was a unique and widely venerated goddess in ancient Egypt. Associated with fertility and protection, she was worshipped for the power embodied in her fearsome hybrid form—part hippopotamus, part crocodile, part lion, with a swollen human belly and breasts. In this shape, she represented both nurturing and destructive forces. Alongside deities like Bes and Hathor, Taweret was especially invoked in the domestic sphere by women and children. She was beloved across social classes, worshipped on a personal level, and held influence over both birth and rebirth—yet, with her monstrous qualities, she also made for a dangerous foe.

Taweret's role in Egyptian society was complex and multifaceted. While often classified as a fertility goddess, she represented much more, encompassing protection, transformation, and the liminal stages of life and death. Her protective ability came from the animals that made up her form—“some of the fiercest species found in ancient Egypt”—whose combined strengths created “a most potent deity.”¹ These same animals appear in the terrifying mythological figure Ammut, but Taweret's human features distinguished her as a maternal and ultimately benevolent force.² This closeness to monstrosity, however, reveals a dual nature; in some accounts, she is portrayed as a threatening presence, even to those she is otherwise believed to protect.³

The hippopotamus, the dominant component of her form, held particular symbolic significance. Although hippopotamuses were associated by the Egyptians with chaos and destruction, females were also admired for their fierce defense of their young.⁴ As a result, Taweret took on a maternal role, reflecting this duality of danger and protection. Since hippos are aquatic, Taweret was also connected to water—specifically, the “waters of birth”—and often referred to as “she who removes the water.”⁵ This aligned her with the annual inundation of the Nile,⁶ a life-giving event central to Egyptian agricultural prosperity. Her swollen belly and breasts thus symbolized not only pregnancy but also abundance and nourishment for the land.⁷

¹ “Taweret Amulet” The Met Museum, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/545344>

² Candace A. Reilly, “Taweret: An Untraditional Egyptian Goddess,” *Inquiries Journal* 3, no. 8 (2011), <http://www.inquiriesjournal.com/articles/556/taweret-an-untraditional-egyptian-goddess>

³ Sabrina Ceruti, “The bAw of Taweret: Vindictiveness (And Forgiveness) of the Hippopotamus Goddess,” *Journal of Ancient Egyptian Interconnections* 25 (March 2020): 63, <https://research-ebsco-com.ezproxy.memphis.edu/linkprocessor/plink?id=b8848aa3-8b5e-3791-bc10-a31ccb148e28>

⁴ Aroa Velasco Pérez, “Hippo goddesses of the Egyptian pantheon,” In *Current Research in Egyptology* 2011, ed. Heba Abd El Gawad et. al. (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2012), 210.

⁵ Aroa Velasco Pérez, “Hippo goddesses of the Egyptian pantheon,” 212.

⁶ Wegner, Jennifer H., “The Goddess Taweret, Protector of Mothers and Children,” *Glencairn Museum News*, September 30, 2014, <https://www.glencairnmuseum.org/newsletter/september-2014-the-goddess-taweret-protector-of-mothers-and.html>

⁷ Reilly, “Taweret: An Untraditional Egyptian Goddess.”

Unlike many state deities worshipped in temples, Taweret was primarily honored in the home.⁶ Altars and offerings dedicated to her were found in domestic spaces across Egypt, from royal palaces to modest dwellings. She was known to “help all Egyptian women regardless of social or economic status,”⁸ and was particularly invoked by women seeking protection in childbirth, guidance in family matters, and support during major life transitions like puberty.⁹ She was even called upon in funerary rituals to aid in the soul’s rebirth, highlighting her role in both the cycles of life and death.¹⁰

Taweret was commonly represented in Egyptian material culture, especially in the form of amulets. The amulet examined in this class’s research project shares traits with others found in museum collections: small, upright with one leg forward, made of blue-green faience, featuring a suspension loop for wearing as a pendant, and dating to the Late Period.¹¹ Faience was a widely accessible and easily crafted material, especially among the non-elite,¹² and its color also carried symbolic meanings. Blue was associated with the sky, solar rebirth, and divine protection, while green symbolized healing, growth, and life. The Egyptian word for green (*w3d*) also meant “whole” or “sound.”¹³

These amulets were believed to possess apotropaic power—protecting the wearer by embodying the very dangers they were meant to ward off.¹⁴ Taweret’s protective nature was often emphasized with additional iconography: she is sometimes shown leaning on a *sa* symbol (a sign of protection) or carrying weapons like a knife, a flaming torch, or even a vertical crocodile.¹⁰ Her amulets were typically worn by pregnant or nursing women and children, and were also placed with the deceased to protect and facilitate rebirth.¹⁵ Figurines and amulets of Taweret were placed on household altars, used in rituals, or displayed in key areas of the home.¹⁴ Her image also adorned objects closely tied to childbirth, including magical wands, feeding cups, and painted birth bricks.¹⁵

From the New Kingdom onward, Taweret remained one of the most widely revered goddesses within the domestic sphere. She was deeply connected to fertility—of both Egypt’s land and its people—and served as a powerful protector of women and children. Her monstrous, hybrid form set her apart from other female deities, yet her image was lovingly embraced by Egyptian women of all social backgrounds. Taweret’s power extended into both earthly and spiritual realms. Even today, her legacy endures: many Egyptian women continue to view her as a guardian of fertility, with some even rubbing the belly of a Taweret statue in Cairo for luck in conceiving.¹⁶ With her complex symbolism, maternal strength, and widespread devotion, Taweret truly earned her title as “The Great One.”

⁸ Timothy S. Y. Lam Museum of Anthropology, “*Egyptian Taweret Amulet*,” <https://lammuseum.wfu.edu/2023/07/egyptian-taweret-amulet/>

⁹ Anna Stevens, “Domestic religious practices,” *UCLA Encyclopedia of Egyptology* 1, no. 1 (2009): 10, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7s07628w>

¹⁰ Aroa Velasco Pérez, “Hippo goddesses of the Egyptian pantheon,” 211.

¹¹ Art Museum of the University of Memphis, “*Taweret Amulet*,” <https://amum.catalogaccess.com/objects/74>

¹² Carol Andrews, *Amulets of Ancient Egypt* (London: British Museum Press, 1994), 100.

¹³ Wegner, “The Goddess Taweret, Protector of Mothers and Children.”

¹⁴ Carol Andrews, *Amulets of Ancient Egypt*, 36.

¹⁵ Smithsonian Museum, *Amulet of the Goddess Taweret*, https://www.si.edu/object/amulet-goddess-taweret%3Afsq_F1907.21

¹⁶ Gay Robins, *Women in Ancient Egypt* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 163.

Further Reading!

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