Hathor Encyclopedia Article

Hathor

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Hathor

HATHOR was an ancient Egyptian mother-goddess figure whose cult center was at Dendera in Upper Egypt. Represented as partially or totally bovine, Hathor the Great was probably an assimilation of several goddesses with similar attributes.

In the Old Kingdom Pyramid Texts (c. 2475 BCE for the earliest copy) Hathor, whose name means "house of Horus," personified the entire Heliopolitan ennead, or family of gods, which provided the principal genealogy of the Horus-king of Egypt. These nine gods began with Atum and proceeded through three more generations to Osiris and Isis, the parents of Horus. With Hathor personifying this whole group of gods, Horus became her son and the son of her spouse, Re, the sun god, who had come to the fore by the fifth dynasty.

Hathor also figured prominently in the royal imagery, particularly in the New Kingdom, when she was frequently depicted as the cow suckling a young pharaoh, and often had shrines or chapels dedicated to her. Her great temple at Dendera, erected in the Ptolemaic and Roman periods, is unique in several respects, including its many subterranean passages and the so-called zodiacal ceiling of its roof's kiosk.

Another small cult temple of Hathor was founded by Ptolemy IV at Deir al-Madīnah, where many earlier tombs show the "lady of the west," a cow coming from the Theban mountain known as the Qurn. Thus as early as the New Kingdom she was associated with the necropolis of that area. "Hathor of the sycamore" is a frequent epithet, and a temple is known as far away as Sinai. There are several references in literary and medico-magical texts to the assistance rendered at birth by the seven Hathors and also to the fates they ordain for the newborn. Hathor "the golden one" was known in love poetry as goddess of love and patroness of lovers.

The sistrum is a musical instrument commonly associated with the worship of Hathor, and her son Ihy was a musician deity. Priestesses of Hathor are known from all periods, although in the later periods there was a tendency to assimilate Hathor and Isis.

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