

# Taweret “the Great One”

## History

Taweret, which literally translates into “the Great One”, is a protective ancient Egyptian goddess who was primarily worshiped in households. Although several manifestations of the goddess are known from Old Kingdom funerary spells (ca. 2686-2160 BCE), her cult did not gain a large following until the rise of personal piety in the New Kingdom (ca 1550-1069 BCE).

Archeological evidence suggests that hippopotamuses made the Nile their homes well before the dawn of Early Dynastic Period (before 3000 BCE). Ancient Egyptians were drawn to the creatures because of their aggressive and protective behavior. Due to this, hippopotami were both feared and revered. Male hippopotami were associated with chaos and to overcome them in royal hunting campaigns was a demonstration of the divine power of the king. However, female hippopotami were revered as a source of luck or protection from harm, evidenced by how they viciously protected their young from harm.

Protective amulets bearing the likenesses of female hippopotami have been found dating as far back as the Predynastic period (c. 3000–2686 BCE). The tradition of making and wearing these amulets continued throughout the history of Egypt into the Ptolemaic Kingdom and the Roman period (c. 332 BCE – 390 BCE).

## A closer look

To the right, Taweret’s head and body is that of a hippopotamus, with the limbs of a lion and the tail of a crocodile. Her physical appearance being that of various animals makes her a *theriomorphic* deity. The combination of these fearsome creatures assembled into one body is meant to symbolize her protective power and physical strength.

She is standing on her hind legs and is baring her teeth, while sticking out her tongue. Although her body composition, pose and facial expression are meant to suggest a sense of danger or fear, her prominent belly, low hanging breasts give her a motherly appearance or that of a pregnant woman. These characteristics relate her to Hapy\*, the god of inundation (flooding of the Nile river) and bringer of fertility.





Usually she is shown with a knife in both hands, ready to strike any threats. Instead, her forepaws are resting on two protective symbols called Sa (detail on left).

For these reasons, amulets bearing her likeness were thought to help prevent childhood illness and death. Her image also appeared on instruments used by midwives during childbirth. And since worship of Taweret was primarily observed in household cults, her image was also found in many household objects both for reverence and the magical qualities that her presence brings.

**\*Note:** *There's a large statue of Hapy, across the hall from the Sunken Cities exhibition. You can't miss her!*

## Sources

"I Cut Up the Oryx for the Ceremonial Barque of Osiris-Sokaris." *Osiris: Egypt's Sunken Mysteries*, by Franck Goddio et al.,

Flammarion, 2018, pp. 166-168.

"Taweret." Wikipedia, Wikimedia Foundation, 1 Nov. 2018, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taweret](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taweret).