

Head of a Figure of the Cow of Hathor **The British Museum**

From Deir el-Bahari, Egypt
18th Dynasty, around 1450 BC

A cult statue



Hathor, as goddess of the West, was particularly associated with the necropolis (cemetery) of the west bank at Thebes. In this form, she was often shown as a woman with a sun disc between a pair of cow's horns on her head. She could also appear as a cow with a sun disc or pair of feathers on its head. This cult statue originally had horns and wore a feather head-dress, both of which were probably gilded. The eyes were inlaid with rock crystal and lapis lazuli. The colour white was associated with sacredness and purity. Sacred animals were often this colour.

The statue was from the shrine of Hathor at the mortuary temple which Hatshepsut (1479-1457 BC) built at Deir el-Bahari. The decoration of the shrine emphasizes a more ancient aspect of Hathor, who since the Old Kingdom (about 2613-2160 BC) was also thought to nurture and protect the king. Hatshepsut used this device to show that the gods recognized her as king, a status to which she had no right as she was a woman. Hatshepsut's self-proclaimed divine birth, and Hathor's aspect as a fertility goddess, meant that many women left offerings at the shrine in hope of conceiving a child.

T.G.H. James and W.V. Davies, *Egyptian sculpture* (London, The British Museum Press, 1983)

S. Quirke and A.J. Spencer, *The British Museum book of anc* (London, The British Museum Press, 1992)

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