

## The guardian lion statues in Egypt During the Graeco-Roman Period

**Dr. Heba Magdy\***

In this research I aim to trace the shape of the guardian lion statues in Egypt during the Graeco-Roman period, apart from the shape of the sphinx.

The lion (apart of the lioness that was worshiped in Egypt under the name of Tefnut, Sekhmet, Mehit ....etc) was a very well-known animal to the Egyptians starting from the prehistoric times, as it used to live in the desert. In the Egyptian mythology, some deities were described as lions. In the Book of the Dead, Re said "*I am the Lion, Re*".<sup>1</sup> There is also the double-lion god Ruty, who is portrayed as a single solar deity or as two deities.<sup>2</sup> These two deities are Shu and Tefnut whose cult place was Heliopolis. There is also god Aker (double-lion), the protector of the gates of the morning and evening.<sup>3</sup> During the New kingdom, In the Delta site of Greek Leontopolis, (ancient Taremu, modern Tell el-Muqdam), the lion god Mihos (Mahes, Greek Mysis or Miysis), the son of Bastet or sometimes of Sekhmet, was sacred. The oldest temple that was built for him is dated back to the 18<sup>th</sup> dynasty.<sup>4</sup> The worship of this god continued in the Graeco-Roman period, as a stela was found at Tell Muqdam, preserved now in The Allard Pierson Museum - Amsterdam – Netherlands (APM 7772), and represents a Ptolemaic king dressed in the ceremonial protruding kilt with tail and provided with a broad collar and the Double Crown. He offers a statue of Ma'at to

---

\* Lecturer – faculty of Tourism & Hotels Alexandria University

<sup>1</sup> Bugde W., "*The Book of the Dead: the Papyrus of Ani*", New York, 1967, 92, 310.

<sup>2</sup> Hornung E., "*Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt: The one and the many*", Cornell University press, 1982, P. 284.

<sup>3</sup> Wit C. de, "*Le Role et le sens du lion dans l'Egypte ancienne*", Leiden, 1951, PP. 123-137.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., PP. 423-425.

Miysis. The scene is accompanied with an inscription reads: “*The Living Lion The king of Upper and Lower Egypt, Ptolemy [, may he live eternally]. The sacred house of the lions' tomb*”.<sup>5</sup>

The lion was usually connected with the king to represent him as a victorious ruler. Therefore, the head of the king appeared attached to the body of the lion, in the so-called the sphinx. From early times the Egyptian king often wore a lion's tail attached to his garment during the ceremonies.<sup>6</sup> Starting from the New kingdom the king was described as a lion. This can be noticed in Tuthmosis III's hymn of Victory where we can read: “*the wild-looking lion, son of Sekhmet*”. It's worth mentioning also that the lion appeared in the conflict scenes of the kings of the New kingdom such as that of Ramses II and III.

In art, the heads of the lions used to adorn the altars, the funerary bed and the thrones. Ancient Egypt knew the original shape of the lion as a guardian statue, as early as the Old Kingdom. However, lion statuettes were known in Egypt starting from the Pre-dynastic period.<sup>7</sup> The guardian lion statue was replaced with the sphinx that took the shape of a recumbent lion with the human-head. The oldest example of this shape is dated back to the fourth dynasty (the Giza sphinx). Then, the shape of the sphinxes became the guardian statues in the temples whether with the head of a human, a ram, or a falcon. However, we can notice that the shape of the lion as a guardian was limited to be represented on the throne of the king (such as the throne of Khafre preserved in the Egyptian Museum of Cairo) or the offering tables. During the Middle kingdom the shape of the lion appeared only in the amulets and the statuettes. Starting from the New kingdom, the lion reappeared as a guardian statue. This

---

<sup>5</sup> Blok H.P, “*der Lowen in Leontopolis*”, Bulletin Antieke Beschaving II, 2, 1927, P. 10 ff.

<sup>6</sup> Erman A., “*life in ancient Egypt*”, New York, 1971, P. 55, 59

<sup>7</sup> Cooney J.D., “*Egyptian Art in the collection of Albert Gallatin*”, In: Journal of Near Eastern studies, Vol. 12, No. 1, 1953, PP. 2-3, Pls. I-III.

continued in the Graeco-Roman period. Four shapes of the guardian lion statue appeared in Egypt at that time:

**The first shape:**

Here the lion appeared recumbent looking forward with his forelegs stretched and parallel to each other. This shape is considered the oldest shape of the guardian lions in ancient Egypt. The earliest lion statue of this shape is a granite statue dates back to the 4<sup>th</sup> or the 5<sup>th</sup> dynasty and was found in the city of Hierakleopolis in El-Fayoum. This statue is preserved now in the Metropolitan Museum of art in New York (Inv. 2000.485) (Pl. 1). A Japanese team working at Saqqara in 2001 unearthed fragments of a terracotta recumbent lion (since restored) among a cache of mostly sixth dynasty objects deposited in a Middle Kingdom tomb. The statue bears the cartouche of King Khufu (4<sup>th</sup> dynasty)<sup>8</sup> (Pl. 2).

This shape can be noticed in two guardian lion statues found in front of the temple of Madinet Madi at El-Fayoum, and are dated back to the Ptolemaic period (Pl. 3). The same shape appeared in a lion statue in front of the temple of Sobek at Tebtunis (Umm el-Baragat), El-Fayoum, and is dated back to the Ptolemaic period (Pl. 4).

**The second shape:**

The lion appeared setting on its haunches with the front legs vertical (known as lion sejant). This shape appeared in two red granite lions flanking the entrance of the first pylon of the temple of Isis at Philae (Pl. 5). These statues are dated back to the Roman era. The same shape appeared on the remains of a lion statue found at Qasr Ibrim, that believed to adorn a gateway there dates back to the third or the fourth century AD.<sup>9</sup> Another statue

---

<sup>8</sup> Yoshimura S., "An Enigmatic Rock-cut chamber: recent Waseda University finds at North Sakkara", KMT: a modern Journal of Ancient Egypt, Summer, 13-2, 2002, PP. 22-29.

<sup>9</sup> Plumley M., "Qasr Ibrim 1974", in: Journal of Egyptian archeology, vol. 61, 1975, P. 12.

from Qasr Ibrim takes the same shape (Pl. 6), bears an inscription of a Meroitic king called Yesbokheamani, dates back to the third century AD, and preserved in the Nubian Museum at Aswan (JE 90879).<sup>10</sup>

The origin of this shape can be traced back to the Pharaonic period. Although this shape didn't appear in any surviving guardian statues from this period, it appeared on statuettes as early as the proto-dynastic period (3200 – 3000 BC). This can be noticed in a terracotta statuette of a lion, found at Nekhen (Hierakonopolis) and preserved in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford (Pl. 7).<sup>11</sup> The shape appeared also in the scenes of the Book of the dead that dates back to the New Kingdom (Pl. 8).<sup>12</sup>

It seems that the most ancient surviving lion sejant statue came from Greece. There is the lion statue that used to guard the port of Piraeus and dates back to the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC. The shape also appeared in the lion statue of Chaeronea, Greece. It was made in marble around 338 BC to mark the tombs of the Thebans after the battle done against the king of Macedonia, Philip.<sup>13</sup> This shape became more popular in Asia Minor and Greece starting from the middle of the fourth century BC.<sup>14</sup>

It seems that this shape, according to my research, didn't appear in a guardian statue in Egypt before the Roman era. During the Roman era this shape appeared particularly in Lower Nubia; this can be obvious in the statues guarding the temple of Isis at Philae, and the statues of Qasr Ibrim. Although this shape was known from the Pharaonic era, we can assume that using this technique in sculpturing statues could be a foreign influence.

---

<sup>10</sup> Hallof J., "Yesbokheamani: der Lowe von Qasr Ibrim", in: Journal of Egyptian Archeology, Vol. 89, 2003, PP. 251 – 254.

<sup>11</sup> Ruhlmann G., "Der Lowe im altaegyptischen triumphalbild", Wissenshaftliche Zeitschrift der Martin-Luther Universitat Halle-Wittenberg, 1964, Taf. II d.

<sup>12</sup> Keel O., "Symbolism of the biblical world", U.S.A, 1997, fig. 18.

<sup>13</sup> Alan H., "The wonders of the World", Vol. 4, 2004, P. 834.

<sup>14</sup> Ratte C., "Five Lydian Felines", in: American journal of Archeology, Vol. 93, 1989, P. 389.

### **The third shape:**

In this shape the recumbent lion appears in a naturalistic relaxed pose with its head turns to the side, the front paws are crossed over each other. The oldest example of this shape is dated back to the reign of Thutmosis III (18<sup>th</sup> dynasty). There is a granite statue of a recumbent lion, is dated back to this period and preserved in the Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, Maryland (Pl. 9). This new technique of the recumbent statues was only limited to the statues of the guardian lions, as the statues of the sphinx and the other recumbent animals preserved their old shape.

This shape of the lion statues was used later by the Pharaohs of the same dynasty. There are two red granite lions, preserved in the British Museum (EA 2), and were used to guard an Egyptian temple in Nubia, precisely at Soleb. These statues are known as "Prudhoe lions".<sup>15</sup> The statues were made for Amenhotep III, which can be confirmed from the inscription engraved around the pedestal that reads: "*Living image of earth, Nebmaat, lord of Nubia, who resides within the fortress of Khaemmaat*".<sup>16</sup> The statue was inscribed a few decades later by King Tutanchamun (Pl. 10). Petrie mentioned that two identical statues were found at Tanis. One was left in situ, in front of the northern pylon of the temple of Khonsu, and the second was transported to Cairo and now adorn the municipal garden of Zamalek.<sup>17</sup>

The same shape of the guardian lion statue was found in the Serapeum of Saqqara and is dated back to the reign of Necatnebo I (30<sup>th</sup> dynasty). The statue is preserved now in the Louvre museum in Paris (Pl. 11). Another lion statue of the same shape is preserved in the Vatican Museum in Rome, and is inscribed

---

<sup>15</sup> Edwards I.E.S, "*The Prudhoe lions, Liverpool*", in: *Annals of Archaeology and Anthropology* 26, 1939, PP. 3-9 ; Ruffle J., "*Lord Prudhoe and his lions*", in: the Sudan Archaeological Research Society, *Bulletin* 2, 1998, PP. 82 – 87.

<sup>16</sup> Lloyd A. B., "*A companion to ancient Egypt*", Vol. 1, 2010, P. 929.

<sup>17</sup> Russmann E.R., "*Eternal Egypt: Masterworks of Ancient Art from the British Museum*", 2001, No. 51, P. 130.

with the name of Nectanebos I (30<sup>th</sup> dynasty). This statue could probably adorn the same previous temple of Saqqara (Pl. 12). A limestone statue of a lion with the same pose preserved in the Egyptian Museum at Turin (866 RCGE 19488) and is dated back to the Late period (Pl. 13).<sup>18</sup>

This shape of lion statues appeared in the Ptolemaic period. There is a lion statue found in front of the temple of Madinet Madi at El-Fayoum, and is dated back to the Ptolemaic period (Pl. 14). Another statue of the same period is preserved in the Brooklyn Museum (Pl. 15).

It seems that, at that time, this relaxed position of the recumbent lion affected the shape of the sphinxes. As this shape appeared on terracotta jar dated back to the 3<sup>rd</sup> – 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC, and preserved in the British Museum (Inv. E37603) (Pl. 16).<sup>19</sup> The jar takes the shape of a female sphinx rests on a plinth. This shape continued to be represented in the Roman era. This can be seen in a green steatite figure of a female sphinx, preserved in the British Museum (Inv. E35724) (Pl. 17).<sup>20</sup>

Let's now try to trace the Origin of this new shape of the recumbent lions. This shape can be seen in the Mesopotamian civilization, as it appeared on the amulets that were found at Tehran, Persia from before 3000 BC. For example, there is a Lapis Lazuli amulet of a recumbent double-faced sphinx, preserved in the British Museum (Inv. 128866) (Pl. 18).<sup>21</sup> This shape became very familiar in the Neo-Sumerian period (equivalent to the Middle kingdom in Egypt). This can be seen in

---

<sup>18</sup> Warmenbol E., "Sphinx, les gardiens de l'Egypte", Bruxelles, 2006, p. 118.

<sup>19</sup> [www.britishmuseum.org](http://www.britishmuseum.org)

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

a statuette of a recumbent Lamassu<sup>22</sup>, dates back to the Neo-Sumerian period, and preserved in the Louvre Museum (AO 2752) (Pl. 19).<sup>23</sup> The animal is shown lying, its head turned to the side and its tail underneath its right hoof. On its head is the divine headdress with three pairs of horns. It has a man's face with large elongated eyes, a beard covering half its cheeks and joining with the mustache before cascading down over its breast, where it ends in small curls, and long ringlets framing its face. The ears, however, are a bull's. There is a small group of these recumbent bulls dating from the Neo-Sumerian period (around 2150-2000 BC), one of which is inscribed with the name of Gudea, the Second Dynasty ruler of Lagash.<sup>24</sup>

A shape of a recumbent lion with a head turns to the side and stretched forelegs parallel to each other appeared also on some Greek recumbent lion statues date back to the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC. The same shape appeared on lion statues in ancient Turkey; such as the lion statue that was found at Sardis, dates back to the reign of Croesus and preserved in the national museum of Constantinople.<sup>25</sup> This shape appeared also at Byblos and Persia around the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC.

As long as the oldest appearance of this shape dates back to the 18<sup>th</sup> dynasty, we can say that this shape was an influence from Mesopotamia; especially that during the reign of Tuthmosis III many influences reached Egypt from the Mesopotamian civilization because of the military invasions of Tuthmosis III that reached this Land.

---

<sup>22</sup> Lamassu is a Mesopotamian protective deity, often depicted with a bull or a lion's body, eagle's wings, and human's head.

<sup>23</sup> [www.louvre.fr](http://www.louvre.fr)

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Theodore L.S., "*the Lion group at Sardis*", in: the Art Bulletin, Vol. 13, No. 2, 1931, PP. 127-137.

### **The fourth shape:**

The lion is appeared in a standing position nursing the cubs. This shape was recently discovered in the avenue that was found in 2009 at the city of Madinet Madi, El-Fayoum through the project of the ISSEMM that was held there. The avenue measures 250 m long from the Isis portal to the big sacrificial altar. It possesses four statues of lions and a standing lioness nursing her cubs (Pl. 20). An inscription found refers to the dedicator of this avenue: *Protar Kos son of Rhodes, his wife Famista, and their children who dedicate the avenue to queen Cleopatra and King Ptolemy.* The dedication is dated back to 116 BC.<sup>26</sup>

The idea of representing a guarding lion statue in the pose of nursing the cubs is unique in Egypt. It seems that this is the only place where we can see a statue like that in Egypt. The pose of a lioness nursing a cube is rare also in the ancient world. We can see this shape adorning the temple of Tobiah the Ammonite in Jordan that dated back to 516 BC (Pl. 21). A relief was found in Palazzo Grimani in Palestrina, It represents a lioness nursing her cub. The relief dated back to the 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C and was part of a panel on a Roman well. It is preserved now in the Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna (Inv. Nr. I 605) (Pl. 22).

---

<sup>26</sup> [www.egittologia.unipi.it](http://www.egittologia.unipi.it) press release conference in October 14<sup>th</sup> 2010 entitled "Madinet Madi, the past, the present and the future - *Shading more Light on the Scientific Work in the Archaeological Site of Madinet Madi.*



**Conclusion:**

- The statues of the lions were used in adorning the gates starting from the old Kingdom. Later, it was replaced with the shape of the sphinx.
- The lion statues reappeared in adorning the gates during the New kingdom and continued during the Graeco-Roman period.
- During the Graeco-Roman period four shapes of the guardian lion statues appeared.
- The shape of the recumbent lion is the only one that considered an influence from the Pharaonic civilization.
- Although the shape of the lion sejant was seen in the Pharaonic scenes, the technique in making a statue of that shape came from Greece and appeared in Egypt only in the Roman era and precisely in lower Nubia.
- The shape of the lion in a relaxed pose appeared for the first time during the reign of Thuthmosis III and carried an influence from the Mesopotamian civilization.
- The technique of the recumbent lion in a relaxed pose was limited to the guardian lion statues and didn't affect the shape of the sphinxes.
- The shape of the standing lioness nursing her cubes is considered rare in the ancient civilization. Only one statue of this shape was found at Fayoum and could carry an influence from Asia Minor.

## Bibliography:

- Alan H., “*The wonders of the World*”, Vol. 4, 2004.
- Bates R., “29 Chinese mysteries”, 2008.
- Blewitt O., “A handbook for travelers in central Italy: Rome and its environ”, London, 1853.
- Blok H.P, “*der Lowen in Leontopolis*”, Bulletin Antieke Beschaving II, 2, 1927.
- Bresciani E. et ali, “*Medinet Madi: Archeological Guide*”, Geodia Edizioni Internazionali, 2010.
- Budge W., “*the gods of the Egyptians*”, Vol. II, Chicago, 1904
- Bugde W., “*The Book of the Dead: the Papyrus of Ani*, New York, 1967.
- Cooney J.D., “*Egyptian Art in the collection of Albert Gallatin*”, In: Journal of Near Eastern studies, Vol. 12, No. 1, 1953.
- Edwards I.E.S, “*The Prudhoe lions, Liverpool*”, in: Annals of Archaeology and Anthropology 26, 1939.
- Erman A., “*life in ancient Egypt*”, New York, 1971.
- Hallof J., “*Yesbokheamani: der Lowe von Qasr Ibrim*”, in: Journal of Egyptian Archeology, Vol. 89, 2003.
- Hornung E., “*Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt: The one and the many*”, Cornell University press, 1982.
- Keel O, “*Symbolism of the biblical world*”, U.S.A, 1997.
- Lloyd A. B., “*A companion to ancient Egypt*”, Vol. 1, 2010.
- Plumley M., “*Qasr Ibrim 1974*”, in: Journal of Egyptian archeology, vol. 61, 1975.
- Ratte C., “*Five Lydian Felines*”, in: American journal of Archeology, Vol. 93, 1989.
- Ruffle J., “*Lord Prudhoe and his lions*”, in: the Sudan Archaeological Research Society, Bulletin 2, 1998.

- Ruhlmann G, “*Der Lowe im altaegyptischen triumphalbild*”, Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift der Martin-Luther Universität Halle-Wittenberg, 1964.
- Russmann E.R., “*Eternal Egypt: Masterworks of Ancient Art from the British Museum*”, 2001.
- Theodore L.S., “*the Lion group at Sardis*”, in: the Art Bulletin, Vol. 13, No. 2, 1931.
- Warmenbol E., “*Sphinx, les gardiens de l’Egypte*”, Bruxelles, 2006.
- Wit C. de, “*Le Role et le sens du lion dans l’Egypte ancienne*”, Leiden, 1951.
- Yoshimura S., “*An Enigmatic Rock-cut chamber: recent Waseda University finds at North Sakkara*”, KMT: a modern Journal of Ancient Egypt, Summer, 13-2, 2002.
- [www.louvre.fr](http://www.louvre.fr)
- [www.britishmuseum.org](http://www.britishmuseum.org)
- [www.metmuseum.org](http://www.metmuseum.org)
- [www.ashmolean.org](http://www.ashmolean.org)
- [www.thewalters.org](http://www.thewalters.org)
- [www.brooklynmuseum.org](http://www.brooklynmuseum.org)
- [www.khm.at/en](http://www.khm.at/en)



Pl. 1  
Recumbent guardian lion statue  
4<sup>th</sup> – 5<sup>th</sup> dynasty, Metropolitan Museum  
After: [www.metmuseum.org](http://www.metmuseum.org)

Pl. 2  
Recumbent guardian lion statue  
4<sup>th</sup> dynasty, Saqqara  
After: Yoshimura S., “*An Enigmatic  
Rock-cut chamber*”, 2002



Pl. 3

Recumbent guardian lion statue  
Temple of Madinet Madi  
Ptolemaic period  
After: Bresciani E., *Medinet Madi*, 2010



Pl. 4

Recumbent guardian lion statue  
Temple of Tebtunis  
Ptolemaic period  
After: *Ibid.*



Pl. 5  
Lion statues, Isis temple (Philae)  
Roman period.

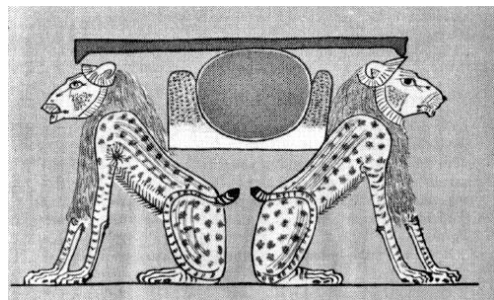


Kairo JE 90879, jetzt im Nubischen Museum in Assuan (copyright Egypt Exploration Society).  
YESBOKHEAMANI—DER LÖWE VON QASR IBRIM (pp. 251-4)

Pl. 6  
Lion statue, Qasr Ibrim  
3<sup>rd</sup> century AD, Nubian Museum  
After: Hallof J., “*Yesbokheamani*”, 2003.



Pl. 7  
terracotta lion statuette  
Ashmolean Museum (Oxford)  
After: [www.ashmolean.org](http://www.ashmolean.org)



Pl. 8  
double-lion, book of the dead  
New Kingdom



Pl. 9  
Recumbent guardian lion statue  
18<sup>th</sup> dynasty, [Walters Art Museum](http://www.thewalters.org)  
After: [www.thewalters.org](http://www.thewalters.org)



Pl. 10  
Granite Recumbent lion statue  
18<sup>th</sup> dynasty, British Museum  
After: [www.britishmuseum.org](http://www.britishmuseum.org)



Pl. 11  
Recumbent lion statue  
30<sup>th</sup> dynasty, Louvre Museum  
After: [www.louvre.fr](http://www.louvre.fr)

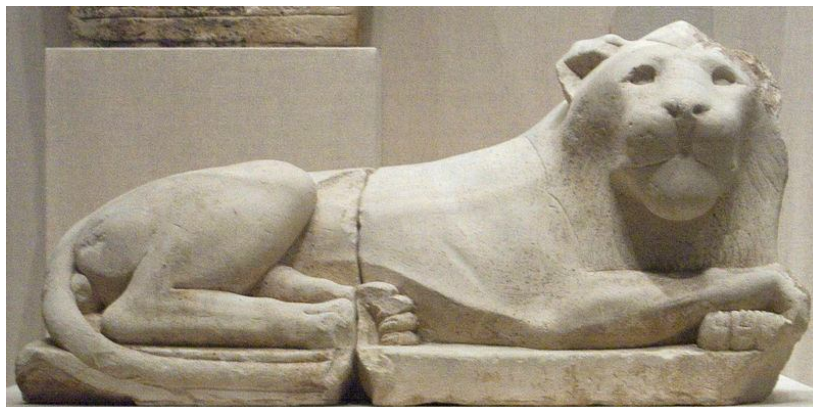


Pl. 12  
Granite Recumbent lion statue  
30<sup>th</sup> dynasty, Vatican Museum  
After: [www.mv.vatican.va](http://www.mv.vatican.va)



Pl. 13  
Limestone recumbent lion egyptian museum  
berlin late period

Pl. 14  
Recumbent lion statue temple of madinet  
madi ptolemaic period  
After : bresciani , medinet madi, 2010



Pl. 15  
Recumbent lion statue  
Ptolemaic period, Brooklyn Museum  
After: [www.brooklynmuseum.org](http://www.brooklynmuseum.org)



Pl.16

After: [www.britishmuseum.org](http://www.britishmuseum.org)  
Recumbent Sphinx  
Ptolemaic period, British Museum



Pl. 17

Recumbent Sphinx  
Roman period, British Museum  
After: [www.britishmuseum.org](http://www.britishmuseum.org)



Pl. 18

amulet with recumbent sphinx  
3000 BC, Persia, British Museum  
After: [www.britishmuseum.org](http://www.britishmuseum.org)



Pl. 19

Recumbent Larassu  
Neo-Sumerian period, Louvre Museum  
After: [www.louvre.fr](http://www.louvre.fr)



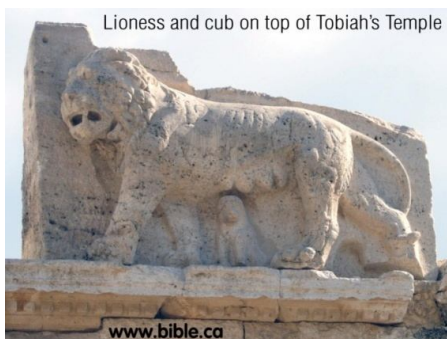


Pl. 20

Lioness nursing cub

Madinet Madi, Fayoum

After: Bresciani, Medinet Madi, 2010



Pl. 21

Lioness nursing cub

temple of Tobiah, Jordan

[www.bible.ca/archeology](http://www.bible.ca/archeology)



Pl. 22

Roman relief, Palestrina

Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna

[www.khm.at/en](http://www.khm.at/en)