

THE FITZWILLIAM MUSEUM

EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

Fact Sheet

The Ancient Egyptians

Animals

There are many varied representations of animals in the Egyptian galleries ranging from small amulets to larger pieces of sculpture. Animals were very important to the ancient Egyptians, not only for the part they played in people's everyday lives but because of the associations individual animals had with particular gods and deities (see Gods and Goddesses Fact Sheet). This fact sheet gives details of a small selection of the animals to be found in our collection.



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Ibis Bird

The sacred ibis would have once lived in the waterside papyrus swamps but it has not been documented in Egypt since 1891. Thoth, the god of wisdom and writing, was represented as a sacred ibis and in later Ancient Egyptian times they were bred and reared in sanctuaries and temples to the god. Ibis were also mummified and several million of these mummified birds have been found. It is thought that these were produced for worshippers at the temples to buy and give as offerings in honour of Thoth. Thoth played an important part in the Weighing of the Heart ceremony (see Coffin Fact Sheet).

Examples of Ibis Birds on Display:

Gilded Figure of Thoth

Gallery 19, Case 11, Label 15, Museum No: E.202.1954

Mummified Ibis

Gallery 19, Case 18, Label 18 E3.1969

Thoth as Ibis painted on coffin of Nespawershefynt

Gallery 19, Case 17, Museum No: E.1.1822

Hippopotamus

The hippopotamus lived in Egypt until at least the New Kingdom, 1550-1068 BC. Hippos were hunted with spears, sometimes for their ivory and also because of their threat to boats, and later as part of a ritual to symbolise the overthrow of evil. The male hippo was thought of as a bad presence that trampled and ate important crops.

In contrast, the female hippo was associated with the goddess Taweret, who was shown as a pregnant hippo, often wearing an elaborate wig. She was a popular household goddess and was associated with women during pregnancy and in childbirth. Blue faience hippos were popular in the Middle Kingdom as a funerary object. They were decorated with painted vegetation to represent fertility and may have represented the regeneration and growth given by the River Nile. An alternative interpretation of their presence in tombs is to symbolise the untamed wilderness of nature, to counterbalance the divine order of "maat".

Examples of Hippopotamus on Display:

Statues of the Goddess Taweret

Gallery 19, Case 11, Label 37, Museum No: E.GA.4573.1943

Gallery 19, Case 18, Label 23, Museum No: E.61.1946

Snakes

There were over forty indigenous varieties of snake in ancient Egypt. Several were poisonous, such as the Egyptian cobra, which could reach up to 2 metres in length, and the small but deadly horned viper. Many snakes, including the cobra and the horned viper, were used as hieroglyphic signs. Snakes could represent creation, rebirth and regeneration due to the shedding of their skins, as well as power and danger. The Cobra was the sacred animal of the goddess Wadjet, goddess of Lower Egypt. It is seen as part of the Pharaoh's headdress, where the cobra is shown rearing up dangerously, ready to attack. This rearing cobra was called the "Uraeus", and it symbolically protected the Pharaoh (see Ramesses Fact Sheet). According to Ancient Egyptian legend it was always watchful on his behalf, its lidless eyes never closed, and would spit into the face of his enemies.

Examples of Snakes on Display:

Uraeus on the pharaoh 's headdress

Lid of sarcophagus of Ramesses III, Gallery 20, Freestanding, Museum No E.I.1823

Plaster Relief of a Cobra

Gallery 19, Case 18, Label 1, Museum No: E.GA.3150.1943

Limestone Cobra

Gallery 19, Case 11, Label 49, Museum No: E.GA .4536.1943

Copper Alloy Cobra "Wand"

Gallery 19, Case 13, Label 34, Museum No: E.63-1896

Painted Wooden Attachment Cobra Uraeus

Gallery 19, Case 13, Label 13, Museum No: E.GA.2863.194

Scarabs

The scarab beetles were, and still found throughout Egypt. Khepri, the god of the morning sun, was represented as a scarab beetle. Scarabs were linked with new life based on the observation that the beetle lays its eggs in a ball laid in the ground, from which the young emerge as if by magic. This made the scarab a potent symbol for the Ancient Egyptians. Scarabs were often made as funerary amulets in faience and other materials, for good luck and protection and included in the mummy wrappings (see Mummification Fact Sheet). Sometimes inscriptions were carved on their bases and they were also made into ornate jewellery.

Examples of Scarabs on Display:

Scarab Amulets

Gallery 19, Case 22, Label 17, Museum No: E.15.1901

End of Coffin of Pakepu

Gallery 19, Case 25 Museum No: E.2.1869

Cats

Cats were pets and hunters, protecting grain stores from mice and rats. These two roles are reflected in tomb paintings, where cats are shown both in hunting scenes and sitting underneath the chairs of their owners.

Cats were also associated with deities throughout the Egyptian period, including the gods Re and Bastet. In mythology, an evil snake, Apophis, tried to swallow the sun but the god Re, as a cat, killed him, thus preventing catastrophe and protecting the balance of the universe. Bastet was the goddess of joy, music, fertility and women in childbirth and is often represented as a cat in bronze figurines.

Cats were also mummified, a reflection of their special status as a sacred animal. The excavations of the Temple of Bastet at Bubastis revealed an enormous cat cemetery of approximately 180,000 cats!

Examples of Cats on Display:

Copper Alloy Figures of Bastet

Gallery 19, Case 11, Label 32 Museum Nos: E.69.1954/ E.70.1954

Wooden Cat

Gallery 19, Case 18, Label 10, Antiquities Loan 118

Mummified Cat

Gallery 19, Case 18, Label 11, Museum No: E.132.1891

The Horus Bird

Another sacred bird was the hawk-like bird, which was associated with Horus, the god of the sky, son of Osiris and symbol of the Pharaoh. The exact identification of the falcon used to depict Horus is uncertain but it may have been partly based on the large peregrine falcon. It became a very popular decorative motif in Egyptian art, used to adorn anything from temple walls to royal jewellery. Falcons (or any similar sized bird of prey), like other animals, were also mummified and placed in tombs and burial sites to bring good luck to the deceased.

Examples of Falcons on Display:

Copper Alloy Figure of Horus as a Hawk

Gallery 19 Case 11, Label 9, Museum No: E.1.1940

Mummified Falcon

Gallery 19, Case 18, Label 19, Museum No: E7.1971

Dog

Dogs appear in hunting scenes and as pets. There were many different breeds of dogs in Egypt and these animals seem to have had a special place in Ancient Egyptian life. Unlike other animals, they were often given personal names and are shown alongside their owners, alert and watchful.

Images of dogs should not be confused with those of jackals, which characteristically have pointed ears and long straight tails. Jackals represent gods of the graveyard, most commonly Anubis.

Examples of Dogs on Display:

Painted Wooden Figure of Anubis

Gallery 19, Case 11, Label 22, Museum No: E.GA.4315.1943

Painted Wooden Coffin of a Dog

Gallery 19, Case 18, Label 12, Museum No: E.47.1902