

# THE FITZWILLIAM MUSEUM

## EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

### Fact Sheet

## The Ancient Egyptians Boats



Tomb Models of boats (Gallery 19, case 25) E.71a-1903 and E.71b-1903

Boats were an essential method of transport in ancient Egypt where the River Nile lay at the heart of the country physically as well as spiritually. The current of the river flowed from south to north, while the prevailing wind blew from north to south so boats needed both sails and oars, depending on the direction of travel. Towing was common so boats were built with sturdy posts at bow and stern around which the tow ropes could be fixed. Boats were steered with long rudder oars, which were attached to tillers; moving the tiller sideways rotated the stock of an oar and moved its blade.

### Construction of Boats

The earliest boats were made from bundles of bound papyrus stalks. The word “sepy”, meaning to bind, could also mean the building of wooden boats. For larger boats, imported wood was used. Smaller vessels were made from local timber, but the planks were short and had to be joined together, either with binding or watertight joints and pegs. As metal tools developed over time, wooden boat construction developed. Adzes, chisels, saws and axes were originally made with copper blades, later with bronze and eventually with iron. Planks and sections were joined by various increasingly sophisticated joints: dowels, mortise and tenon joints and dovetailing techniques were all used.

### Model Boats

The boats on display in the galleries are part of a group of tomb models. When model boats were placed in tombs, there were usually two, one for sailing upstream (sails up) the other for rowing downstream. The two models pictured above are made of wood, originally covered with a thin layer of plaster, and linen. Some of the difficulties of navigating the waters of the Nile can be seen in the actions of the crews. On both boats, pilots stand on the bow and originally they may have held something with which to test the depth of the water. On the sailing boat, two men lean on long poles to push off and help the boat through the shallows. The steering mechanisms can clearly be seen on both models.