

# ANCIENT EGYPTIAN SNAKE MYTHOLOGY AS SEEN AT THE BRITISH MUSEUM

ANTHONY POOLE

*152 Collingwood Drive, Great Barr, Birmingham B43 7JJ*

## INTRODUCTION

It may seem, from the perspective of the modern herpetologist, that it is only during the past few decades that the value and beauty of snakes has been appreciated, albeit by a dedicated few. However, this is certainly not true as the snake has played a significant part in several cultures, not least in ancient Egypt, and this can clearly be seen in the Egyptology collection at the British Museum.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Current understanding of ancient Egyptian society is still fairly patchy, which is hardly surprising given that it extends back over five thousand years, but has increased dramatically over the past few decades owing to deciphering of hieroglyphics and improvements in archeological techniques. One thing is certain however, the Egyptian people were very much tied to the land, as agriculture and hunting were the basis for survival, and this led to a wide variety of observations and speculation about the fauna of the area.

The special relationship between Egyptian people and wildlife is clearly expressed in artefacts that have survived. Many of these depict scenes of religious significance and can clearly be seen on elaborately painted coffins, where animals and human forms with animal characteristics are the embodiment of cult icons. In addition, their hieroglyphic symbols contain several animals, including snakes, as a part of their language that demonstrates the closeness of Egyptian culture to the natural world.

Two recognisable species of snake were commonly depicted, the Saharan Horned Viper (*Cerastes cerastes*) and the Egyptian Cobra (*Naja haje*), the former being easily identified, even in the crudest symbols, by the often exaggerated horns above the eye and the latter through the spread hood. Both of these species would have been remarkable for their distinct appearance, ability to disappear quickly and without trace and also for their ability to kill with speed. It is very unlikely that the concept of envenomation would have been grasped and one must presume that a high proportion of snake-bite victims would have died given the limited medical knowledge available.

In addition, it seems likely that the Egyptians would have had considerable fascination for a snake's skin shedding process, that may have symbolised rebirth of life, a subject that had enormous importance for their culture. Although the exact details of their beliefs surrounding life after death cannot be known, the elaborate nature of funerals, that ensured the dead person had as many worldly possessions as possible, and the care that was taken during embalming of the body, both suggest a strong belief in some form of afterlife. If ecdysis did appear to be a kind of regeneration of life than one can see another reason for the snake to have such a powerful and mysterious image for Egyptians.

One of history's most famous snakes, the 'asp' of Cleopatra fame, may also provide an insight into their cultural significance. As Professor Cloudsley-Thompson (1994) points out in a recent paper, the snake most likely to have been responsible for Cleopatra's death was the Egyptian Cobra, but why choose to commit suicide by using a snake rather than a simpler method? In fact, Cleopatra had attempted suicide previously, once with a knife and once by setting fire to a building. Both these attempts were made under pressure, but the final one was a more considered effort. The choice of the 'asp' may have been made because of its association with the sun God Ra, which, according to the historian W.W. Tarn, was seen as his divine minister capable of deifying those killed.

So, one can see there is a substantial amount of historical evidence suggesting that snakes had significant role in Egyptian mythology and this can clearly be seen at the British Museum.

## SNAKE REPRESENTATION

Many of the exhibits in the Egyptology collection are herpetologically interesting, the following being especially noteworthy:

**Exhibit No. 29779 The Coffin of Nebudjat Priestess of Min (Post 200 B.C.).** The main depiction on the lid is of the passage of the Sun God in a boat from day to night, who is represented at the back of a line of twelve protectors. These are people and animal-headed people, with various symbolic functions, that are using a snake as a protective force. Each of the people have their arms held down by their sides in order to support the body of a huge snake that stretches the entire length of the line of people. Its body is grey with regular black crossbars and the head region is an exaggeration of a cobra's hood. This formidable creature is arrayed against four grotesque green dog-like creatures apparently attacking the boat.

There are other snake images on this coffin, but their meaning is less clear. On each side of the lid there are fifteen boxes that contain animal headed human forms, one side having a snake above every box. They are all facing in one direction, uniform in size and are painted in a concertina form that is probably an exaggeration of a snake's movement. It seems very likely that these images would have had considerable importance to ancient Egyptians, given their prominence on the coffin and that they appear above the human forms, but a more precise significance can only be conjecture.

**Exhibit No. 22942 Coffin of Ahmose, Theban Official (c. 1050 B.C.).** This example is probably more than 800 years earlier than the previous one and also shows snake symbolism. On the floor of the coffin is a representation of the dead King Amenophis I, patron of Theben workmen, that provides two very important Egyptian images seen on many different artefacts. Firstly, the King is shown wearing a crown that has a Cobra rearing at the front, which believed to have come into existence when Upper and Lower Egypt were united as one political entity, and symbolises the King's power. Just above this is an representation of the Sun God Ra as winged and with two Cobras coming from him. This clearly shows the direct relationship between the most important God and snakes.

**Exhibit No. 22939 Coffin of Priestess, Tjntmutengebtiu (c. 1000 B.C.).** Several of the depictions on the outside of this coffin are of snakes that have wings, an association that seems relatively commonplace. On both sides one can see a fairly large image, some 8 inches by 8 inches of winged cobras alongside two figures that wear the crown of unified Egypt. It may be that ancient Egyptians believed snakes had wings as a necessary method of movement in the spiritual world, possibly because of their close association with the Sun God, who may have been regarded as an airborne powers.

In this scene one can see another form of association between Sun God and snake. There is an elaborate pillar in the centre of the scene that has two snake heads on the top, both having yellow circles on their heads that represent the God in a slightly different form from those mentioned before.

### CONCLUSION

The British Museum's collection of ancient Egyptian artefacts gives the modern herpetologist a fascinating insight into a distant culture's perception of snakes and provides examples of most important associations with key divinities. In addition, there are other representations to be seen that have not been so clearly explained, which gives the interested herpetologist room to provide their own speculative theories.

### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Cloudsley-Thompson, J.L. (1994) Cleopatra's Asp. *British Herpetological Society Bulletin* 50, 18-19.
- Morris, D. (1965). *Snakes and Men*. Hutchinson of London.
- Tarn, W.W. and Charlesworth, M.P. (1952) Cleopatra's Death. *Cambridge Ancient History* Volume 10 Chapter III; VII.