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Ancient Egyptian Boats

By Dr. Sherin ElKhawaga

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Egyptians pioneered the development of river craft and there were many different types built for various uses. Agricultural produce, troops, cattle, stone and funeral processions were all carried on the Nile and its canals. These boats were made of bundles of bound papyrus reeds. Papyrus is different from paper because papyrus is a laminated material made from thinly cut strips from the stalk of Cyprus Papyrus plant. It was believed to be first used about 4000 B.C., and became Egypt's major exports.

There were many types of boats that Egyptians used. Papyrus boats were used by Egyptians. Papyrus boats were built with bundles of papyrus. They were steered with oars. Sailboats were used a lot by Egyptians. Sailboats were steered by two oars. Sailboats usually only had one square sail. Funeral boats carried dead people down river. They were used to carry the dead across the Nile River. The funeral boats were very elaborate.

The earliest record of a ship under sail is depicted on an Egyptian pot dating back to 3200BC. These Egyptian boats were made of either native woods or conifers from Lebanon.

Papyrus boats were useful for hunting or crossing short stretches of water, using a paddle or a pole. These boats were made of bundles of bound papyrus reeds, and were lashed together into a long thin hull form in the style of a slight crescent. This lifted the ends out of the water. The bundle was made as wide as possible for stability, and an extra bundle was put on top so that the cargo and crew were kept reasonable dry. (Reed vessels like these of Ancient Egypt are still in use in Peru today.)

Cedar was very important to the Egyptians as a boat building material. These boats were built of relatively short blocks of timber, and were braced and secured with rope lashings very much in the same style that was used in papyrus boats. This wooden model of the funerary boats found at Thebes, with its two pointed ends rising out of the water, is a good example.

All the cities and towns were easily accessible by boat, and the Nile provided the perfect means of transport, since it was cheap and quick. The necessary water power was provided by the current and the wind.

Officials went up and down the Nile with stone for building projects or grain for the kings stores, and merchants carried wares for sale. Every corner of civilized Egypt could be easily reached and Egyptian traders sailed to ports in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Red Sea.

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Funeral boats were very elegant and took the pharaoh to the grave. The funeral boats were buried with the pharaoh. The Egyptians only used chisels to cut boats from wood. It took them a very long time to make a boat. Khufu's boat was 141 feet long and did not even have a nail in it. The Egyptians had a hard time making and sailing boats. There were papyrus and sailing boats too.

Building and sailing for the Egyptians wasn't always easy. The Egyptians had a hard time sailing a boat. Rowing a boat was a hard job because the boats were so big and heavy. It was also a hard job because the oars the Egyptians steered with were very heavy. Egyptians had a hard time building boats too. Making a boat was a very long and hard job because the boats were big. Boats were hard to make because all the Egyptians had to cut the wood with was a chisel. Sailing was easy too. Sails just carried the Egyptians which ever way the wind was blowing. Which is up the Nile River, against the current.

In the pyramid of King Khufu, the world's oldest boat was found. Its 1200 pieces were found stored unassembled, with matching hieratic signs, (which were a written version of hieroglyphics). These hieratic signs indicated to which quarter of the boat the parts belonged.

Khufu's barge measured 150 feet from long beam to stern. Different theories arose as to the intended use of the boat. Was it for Khufu's use in the afterlife? Or as some believe, was it part of the funeral cortege, which may have carried his body from Memphis to Giza.

The boat's 1,224 separate components included cedarwood planking and oars, ropes of halfa grass, wooden dowels and battens, and copper staples. Its near-perfect preservation allowed conservators to reconstruct the 144-foot-long craft, which is now housed in a white museum built over the pit where it was found. Modern ropes were used to lash it together, but its timbers are 95 percent original.

The Abydos ships.

In 1991 in the desert near the temple of Khentymentiu, archaeologists uncovered the remains of 14 ships dating back to the early first dynasty (2950–2775 BC), possibly associated with King Aha, the first ruler of that dynasty. These 75 foot long ships are buried side by side and have wooden hulls, rough stone boulders which were used as anchors, and "sewn" wooden planks. Also found within their desert graves were remains of the woven straps that joined the planks, as well as reed bundles that were used to seal seams between planks. The Abydos ships have the honor of being the world's oldest planked boats.

The ancient Egyptians were creating ships with technological skills far beyond their time, well before the invention of the wheel. Egyptologists suspect that simple light rafts made from bundled papyrus reeds may have been made by hunter-gatherers who moved to the Nile Valley during the Upper Paleolithic period; of course, no specimens remain today. However, there is evidence of the presence of boats in the Naqada II culture, which immediately preceded the dynastic period. Archaeologists have unearthed red painted pottery with designs that include boat motifs as important symbols, and some interpretations stress the boats were used in a religious or ritual capacity. Further evidence for the early use of boats lies in tomb reliefs (ship building scenes were among the most popular motifs in tombs), paintings, and model boats dating from predynastic times through the New Kingdom. Papyrus rafts appeared to gain a somewhat sacred significance as far back as the first dynasty because of their association with the sun god. The earliest depictions of the sun god show him travelling on a reed float made of bound papyrus, a portrayal so ancient that it predated Egyptian knowledge of wooden ships. It is because of this connection with the sun god that the papyrus raft gained its religious significance, and even though it was used for more practical purposes in Egyptian

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civilization, the sacred and royal association stuck.

Over time, ancient Egyptians created and utilized three types of boats, each with its own purpose. Simple reed rafts were used mostly for hunting in marshes and as time progressed, they were used less frequently on the Nile. Wooden boats generally replaced papyrus rafts for Nile travel, and, since they were faster and more stable than rafts, they were also used for transport. Eventually stronger wooden boats were used for lengthy ocean excursions as well as to transport boulder blocks weighing many tons and obelisks weighing hundreds of pounds from quarries to pyramid and temple building sites. The third type of boat was the papyriform boat, made technologically similar to wooden boats but with the shape of an elaborate papyrus raft in order to maintain the connection to royalty and gods. These ships appear to have been used as pleasure boats and transportation for royalty; they were also used as funerary boats and burial boats, as well as in religious events like pilgrimages and transporting the statue of a god.

The famous Royal Ship of King Cheops (fourth dynasty ruler of the Old Kingdom), more formally known as Khufu, is a perfect example of a papyriform boat. Discovered around 1954, the Royal Ship is still considered to be one of the world's most outstanding archaeological artifacts. The ancient boat had been dismantled into 651 separate parts, and its nearly perfectly preserved timbers were found in 13 scrupulously arranged layers that were buried in a sealed boat pit which was carved into the Giza

plateau's limestone bedrock. It took years for the boat to be painstakingly reassembled, primarily by the Egyptian Department of Antiquities' chief restorer, Ahmed Youssef Moustafa (later known as Hag Ahmed Youssef). Once completed, the Royal Ship measured approximately 150 feet in length. The timbers were made of Lebanese cedar while the pegs and other small parts were made from native acacias, sycamores and sidders.

Cedar was not new to the Egypt of Cheops' time – it had been found in predynastic graves, indicating to modern archaeologists that trade had occurred with Lebanon at least as far back as the end of the fourth millennium BC. Egyptians had what has been termed as an "emotional need" for trade with Lebanon because of that country's large supply of the invaluable resinous woods and oils so necessary in Egyptian funerary customs. Trade with Lebanon had to be conducted over water, because the Egyptians had neither wheeled transportation nor heavy draft animals, and the brutal desert regions through which they would have had to travel hosted hostile tribes.

The supposition is that heavy ships and smaller trading ships were most likely constructed in the Nile Valley, then dismantled and carried piecemeal to Qoseir where they were reassembled and put in the sea. In general, sea-going boats were referred to by the ancient Egyptians as "Byblos boats" because the earliest seaworthy boats' initial trade was with the Lebanese port town of Byblos.

Transportation and trade were not the only reasons for seaworthy boats to be built in ancient Egypt. The pharaohs also recognized the need for a powerful navy.

Many pharaohs achieved incredible feats with their fleets, such as Queen Hatshepsut's voyage to Punt, but from the 20th dynasty on, they improved their ships even more by copying some of the more advanced models used by other cultures. Herodotus describes the Egyptians as having boats "in great numbers" and carrying "many thousands of talents' burden".

Papyriform boats were also used to transport images of important gods, but these vessels were never intended to be put in the water. The image of the god would be placed upon a gold encrusted papyriform barque studded with gems that was carried on the shoulders of priests who took it to its place of honor. If this journey included a trip on the Nile, the golden barque was put on a papyriform transport boat and taken to its destination.

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From boat pits such as those of Cheops and at Abydos, we know that actual full-sized boats were buried with the dead to take them on their journey in the afterlife, but by the twelfth dynasty this practice became too expensive. So instead, models of boats were placed in the tombs, which would serve the same purpose as the full-sized vessels. In addition to models of boats, there were also miniature models of daily life, including bakeries, butcher shops, and potters' studios. These models have given archaeologists wonderful glimpses into ancient life.

While royal papyriform vessels remained relatively unchanged throughout the centuries, the hundreds of model boats found in private tombs show a tremendous variety of shapes. Unlike court artisans who were strictly held to tradition, private artists could customize their clients' models according to their wishes or they could produce models with their own creative touches, as long as they stayed within certain basic limits.

Even lighthouses were developed in ancient Egypt under Ptolemy Soter (circa 290–270 BC). The Pharos lighthouse of Alexandria may have been the first Egyptian lighthouse, as there are no records describing earlier ones. The Pharos lighthouse was over 100 meters high and contained a mirror that reflected the sun during the day, while at night the light of a fire was used to warn incoming and passing vessels. The light could be seen at a distance of 50 kilometers.

For ancient Egyptians, the Nile could have been an obstacle that kept them pinned to one location. But with their seemingly endless creativity and resourcefulness, they turned their watery boundary into an open highway of opportunity.

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A Look Into Egyptian Religion

By Kadence Buchanan

By far, the ancient Egyptian culture represents one of the least understood and most interesting facets of beliefs throughout human history. In this article, we'll give you a basic idea of what modern day man knows about what the ancient Egyptians put their faith in.

Our understanding of Egyptian religion is far from complete. Many of the things that we know about their religion seem incomplete; we seem to have found alternate gods they've worshipped that served the same purposes, as well as conflicting stories about what they believed about how the world was formed. While our knowledge is somewhat lacking, we'll focus on what we do know.

Many researchers feel that one of the most basic forms of religious identity that the Egyptians performed was the worship of animals. The tribes of Egypt that existed pre-dynasty often worshipped different animals as gods that represented their feelings of which animal was in most relation to their way of life. Many of these gods were shown in pictures and writings to have an animal head on a human body, with an example being Ophois, the god of war, who had a wolf's head. Some gods were identified with multiple animals, as well, such as Thoth, who was associated with the ibis, the baboon, and the moon. The creationist beliefs of the Egyptians varied from tribe to tribe. Some felt that the god

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Khnum had built the world on a potter's wheel, while others felt that the existence of the universe was due to the spiritual thought of the god Ptah.

Organized religion found its way into Egypt at around 3200 BC, when Egypt became organized as a state. Many of the gods that the ruling class were in favor of received the most acclaim throughout the land, with the god Amon receiving much more acclaim than he had previously. The Egyptian religious experience was unique in that over time, the ruling class had the power to directly influence which gods received the most praise. As time changed, different gods came into the limelight. Any way you put it, we still don't have a concrete knowledge of the beliefs held by these ancient peoples. Hopefully, time and exploration can help us to clear up many of the difficult questions posed by Egyptian religion.

Kadence Buchanan writes articles for

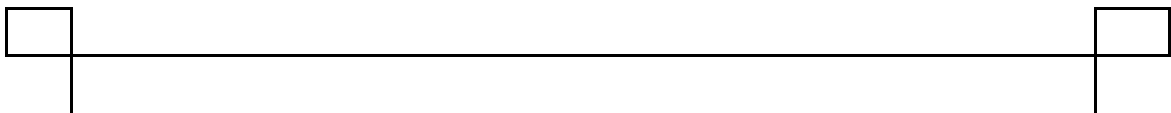
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