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HEDGEHOGS AND HYENAS
PECULIAR ANIMALS OF ANCIENT EGYPT

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Abstract: This essay discusses archeological information gained from the study of Egyptian artifacts, specifically focused on hedgehogs and hyenas. The aim of this paper is to expand our understanding of these animals in the day-to-day lives of Egyptians from this period, and further clarify the symbolism that they hold. Understanding the importance of less common animals within ancient Egyptian religion and symbolism is vital to understanding how the average person lived and interacted with the world around them.

Animal symbolism is a well-known aspect of ancient Egyptian religious practice and art. Most people are acquainted with Egyptian artwork depicting human bodies with animal heads; Anubis the Jackal, Horus the Hawk, and Hathor the Cow are some examples. However, a general understanding of the symbolism behind this common practice, and more specifically the symbolism of lesser-known animals, is uncommon. Egypt has a varied range of ecosystems within its borders and is diverse in its flora and fauna. With high contact between humans and animals being a normal aspect of life, it is no surprise that the lesser-known animals of Egypt would play an important role in the lives of the ancient Egyptians. There are two animals that one would not readily associate with Egypt, but were present and important in their culture: the hedgehog and the hyena.

Both animals are found in modern and ancient Egypt. Depictions of hedgehogs and hyenas can be found as far back as the Predynastic Era in tomb artwork, as statues, and as carvings. Ancient Egyptians heavily used symbolism in their lives; thus, it is a simple conjecture to make that, for the Egyptians, an animal worth depicting carried an associated symbolism.
Hedgehogs

Often seen as a modern-day house pet, hedgehogs are first and foremost wild animals. Hedgehogs can be found in the forests of Europe, the deserts of Africa, as well as many other diverse ecosystems. The subspecies of hedgehog endemic to the area of Africa that encompasses Egypt is the long-eared hedgehog (*Hemiechinus auritus*).¹ There are two specific habits of the hedgehog that Egyptian symbolism expounds upon: hibernation and rolling up into a ball as a defense mechanism. In relation to ancient Egypt, the hedgehog’s cyclical hibernation pattern, or torpor pattern, would have lined up with the yearly flooding of the Nile. Torpor is a state of physical and/or mental lethargy common in mammals who are known to hibernate; it acts as a stand in for full hibernation when the animal may need to quickly or regularly wake up to protect itself or eat food.² Since hedgehogs “enter periods of torpor during the summer,”³ this would have been in the same timeframe as the Nile flooding, which takes place between May and August. The flooding of the Nile was a symbol of rebirth and rejuvenation, and, following a similar annual schedule, the same symbolism could be applied to the sleeping and awakening of the hedgehogs. The ancient Egyptians were a people who relied on and believed in symbolism and representation of their religious mindset in their environment; seeing an animal effectively living out the rejuvenation process would have been important to them and been a further indicator that their religious beliefs of the cyclical nature of life bore merit.

Regarding hedgehogs rolling up into a ball as a defense mechanism, this also likely had symbolic meaning to the ancient Egyptian people. This act of self-defense would have been seen as a symbol of protection leading to the usage of imagery of hedgehogs in amulets and other protective symbols;⁴ one clear example is that of a funerary boat found in Tell Ibrahim Awad, which will be touched on shortly.⁵ Beyond the two commonly known habits of the hedgehogs, it is also important to note other of its abilities that would have symbolic importance to the ancient Egyptian people. Hedgehogs are considerably fast and can cover roughly eight to nine kilometers in a single day.⁶ Along with their speed, they are nocturnal animals. Both of these abilities, along with their protective abilities and

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² Webster’s Online Dictionary: Torpor.
hibernation habits, would have probably endeared them to the ancient Egyptians as guides or protectors, specifically to those who had passed on. As a guide into the darkness of the afterlife, hedgehogs would have been a reassuring presence. This usage as a guide and protector in the afterlife can be seen by the artifact known as the “hedgehog-ship.” This artifact was discovered in 1993 in Tell Ibrahim Awad, located in the north-eastern tip of modern-day Egypt, near the border with Israel. This artifact, found in a tomb, conveys a clear symbolic meaning: a protector taking the soul, or *ka*, of the departed on their journey to the afterlife. This symbolism can be construed from the usage of the hedgehog’s body as the boat, its back to the water, in the act of curling up to protect itself and whatever was carried on its stomach. This ship was not a full-size ship that could have carried a human body, but was instead a small symbol of its purpose, only around 10 centimeters in length. This symbolic artifact would seem to indicate the usage of hedgehogs as sources of protection and guidance, at least during the Old Kingdom Period, for the deceased in the afterlife.

Beyond their possible symbolic connection to the afterlife, hedgehogs also served other purposes to the people of ancient Egypt; they were hunted for food and sport. Their small size and speed would have made them a challenge to hunt and would have probably showcased the advanced ability of the hunters to capture a small and quick moving target. According to the Ebers Medical Papyrus from the 18th Dynasty, the quills could be ground up and mixed with fat to produce a cure for baldness.

Hedgehogs were not associated with a deity until the discovery of the 26th Dynasty Tomb of Bannentiu in the Bahariya Oasis in 1938. Within the tomb were two painted scenes depicting the hedgehog goddess Abaset (Fig. 1). In the scene, she is shown next to Ra-Horakhty with her arm up as a form of protection. One of her roles within the pantheon of Egypt was that of protector, once again relating back to the concept of protection demonstrated by actual hedgehogs and their ability to curl up into themselves.

Hedgehogs, while not the most important of animals, played an important role in the life and religion of the ancient Egyptians. Its status as a protector and guide should not be dismissed and should in fact be studied more fully. The ability of the

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8. Ibid., 197.
12. The more common spelling of this name is Ra-Horakhty, written as ‘Rehorakhty’ in the source.
ancient Egyptians to layer symbolism on symbolism, especially when related to the natural world around them, means that any usage of an animal in their artwork has more to it than just its perceived beauty. Knowing the status and symbolism the hedgehog held with ancient Egyptians will help modern-day Egyptologists and researchers understand more fully other facets of the day-to-day lives of ancient Egyptians.

**HYENAS**

An animal known for its dog-like characteristics, laughing bark, and scavenging tendencies, the hyena was a common animal in ancient Egypt. Hyenas can be found in most parts of Africa, with the specific subspecies, the Striped Hyena (*Hyaena hyaena*), found more commonly in the geographical region of Egypt. The hyena, while naturally a wild animal, could often be found on the outskirts of human settlements or in their ruins, as that was an easy place to scavenge for scraps of food with minimal effort on the part of the hyena. This means that hyenas were not an uncommon sight and would have been well-known to the ancient Egyptian citizens. While in modern culture hyenas have been villainized by popular media, in the culture of ancient Egypt they claimed much more importance and status.

The depictions of hyenas in many artifacts indicate some knowledge of and closeness to them. One intriguing interaction is documented in artwork from the Old Kingdom Period, in the Tomb of Mereruka (Fig. 2). The hyena is shown on its back with its four paws bound while a servant forces food into the hyena's mouth. It could be construed as a symbol of power. That a feral and wild animal could be controlled and domesticated in such a way would say a lot about the power, wealth, and resources an individual had available to them. Only the rich could have afforded to feed and care for a dangerous animal like the hyena. It is important to understand that not only was it expensive to feed hyenas, as they can consume around one third of their body weight in a single sitting, and they are incredibly strong and difficult to handle. This meant that it took not only wealth, but time and people to handle them. A single servant could not care for a captured hyena; that task would easily require two or three servants, and that number would only increase with the addition of each hyena in a collection, hence why owning a hyena would have symbolized high status in society. Over time this status of wealth and power changed. By the Middle Kingdom and New Kingdom era, the value and importance of hyenas had changed as evidenced by the lack of hunting depictions and general art containing hyenas. The purpose of owning hyenas is not fully clear,

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14. Ibid.
but two potential reasons stand out. Hyenas would have been an excellent choice to hunt, as their size, power, and ferocity would have made them a challenging trophy to capture. The other reason being the common desire of humanity to tame and domesticate animals around them to serve a greater purpose, as is seen by the worldwide practice of domesticating animals such as cows, dogs, cats, horses, and others. While a domestic purpose is not especially clear in regard to hyenas, it is plausible that their usage as trackers in hunts, or as pet-like companions would have been a desirable outcome to citizens of ancient Egypt.

Hyenas were familiar to the average ancient Egyptian citizen. In a workman’s village just outside of Tell el-Armana, located on the East bank of the Nile near the center of Egypt and dating from the time of Akhenaten, 1330 BCE, several bones from hyenas were found. The bones all bore markings consistent with butchering practices of the time. The specific practice was that of muscle group stripping, where cuts are made on or near the insertion points of major muscles and then leveraged apart to separate joints and limbs from the main torso. A left pelvic bone of a hyena is the best and clearest image of this butchering technique. There are well-defined cut marks along the bone, and clusters of them around where the joint of the leg would have met with the pelvis. The cuts demonstrate the butchering method used to separate the left leg from the torso of the body. All the hyena bones found at the Tell el-Armana location bear similar marks, the cuts being individual to each bone or body part. This indicates that the butchering of a hyena was not an outlier event that occurred to a singular hyena, but was a wider-spread practice. As seen by the precision and cleanliness of the cuts, these were handled by professional butchers who knew how to butcher and prepare hyenas for consumption. Along with the marks of butchering on the bones, it is important to note the presence of trichinosis (a disease) in the meat of hyenas, which has also been found in mummified human remains. Trichinosis can be found in many carnivorous and omnivorous animals. When consumed, the disease begins in the stomach and spreads to surrounding muscle groups, eventually leading to a general weakening of the host and fever and inflammation. While it can be contracted from eating various carnivores, it is interesting to note the relation between infected mummified remains and the butchered bones of hyenas. While the presence of trichinosis does not definitively prove the consumption of hyena meat in ancient

16. Ibid., 617–618.
17. The image can be found in Legge’s article. Unfortunately, permission to use the image here was not granted.
19. Ibid., 620.
Egypt, it still adds a layer of credibility to the claim, especially considering the lack of other carnivorous animals available to the ancient Egyptians for consumption.

Based on the status of the workman’s village, and the inherent risk of eating meat containing trichinosis, it seems that, while an acceptable food source, hyena meat was not considered to be a luxury item. It was eaten out of necessity, not raised or domesticated to serve as a reliable and constant food source. The cost of raising hyenas as a food source would have outweighed the quantity of food a single animal provided, as it would eat far more viable food than it produced, thus making it a non-viable food source. Previously in the Old Kingdom, it could have been a more high-status meal to indicate that a person or family had the wealth available to provide for and farm hyenas, but that has not been proven, and is simply a conjecture.

Beyond being a source of food and hunting entertainment, certain parts of hyenas were used as wearable items. Hyena teeth specifically were used as a protective amulet.\(^\text{20}\) The hyena, despite attempted domestication and consumption, was still a wild animal, able to defend itself from harm, and this would have resonated with ancient Egyptians. Hyenas are excessively strong for their size, utilizing sharp claws and teeth to defend themselves. Their ability to protect and defend

\(^{20}\) Legge, “The Hyena in Dynastic Egypt,” 617.
themselves likely led to the usage of those defensive body parts in protective amulets, as we see with hyena tooth protective amulets.

**Conclusion**

Overall, the desire of ancient Egyptians to protect themselves and finding protective symbolism in the animals around them is indicative of the world they lived in. Ancient Egypt was not a perfect utopia. Dangerous animals like hippopotamus, lions, and scorpions were all around. Invasions from foreign countries and armies was a constant worry. Droughts, famines, and massive storms were a natural part of life. Disease and injury were also a common occurrence. Ancient Egyptians lived in a world where there was a very real need for protection. This need for protection would have probably influenced the symbolism associated with animals around the people of ancient Egypt. Finding an animal that could roll up into a ball with sharp spines or an animal that had sharp teeth and extreme strength to defend itself would have stood out to ancient Egyptians trying to protect themselves and that would have translated over into their depictions of said animals. This is probably why there is a usage of hyena teeth in protective amulets and hedgehog shapes in burial boats.

*Figure 2: Servants feeding the hyenas, Tomb of Mereruka. Public domain, courtesy of www.meretsegerbooks.com.*
Beyond the protective assets of the hedgehog and hyena, these two animals also provided other benefits to ancient Egyptians: they were forms of entertainment and food. These two benefits say a great deal about the lives of ancient Egyptians. As forms of entertainment, specifically hunting, it demonstrates a joy for life that is well documented in painted and carved scenes in tombs and temples. This search for enjoyment impacted their understanding of life and the afterlife, hence it is logical that the animals around them played a key role in their philosophy.

As food, these animals provided the essential nutrients for survival. Neither animal would have been considered as a consistent source of food, but they were used when needed. The size of hedgehogs, especially the smaller-than-average breed found specifically in Egypt, would have provided very little meat. The hyenas would have provided significantly more food when eaten, but the risks of contracting disease and the fact that, if raised, the hyenas would eat more than they produced food-wise would not have made them a viable source of food long-term. This demonstrates a possible struggle that lower-class ancient Egyptians faced when finding food. That being said, it could have also been a result of famine, cultural practice, or simply out of necessity.

Hedgehogs and hyenas played an integral part in the day-to-day life of the average ancient Egyptian citizen. Their uses, both physical and symbolic, demonstrate...
an awareness and respect that the people of ancient Egypt had for the world around them. To a people who saw layer upon layer of symbolism in their surroundings, the animals that they saw would not have been exempt. The protection of the hedgehogs and the power of the hyenas would have been important to the denizens of ancient Egypt and would have influenced how they interacted with each of the animals. Through sculptures, paintings, writings, and carvings, it is clear that even minor animals played an important role in Egypt and that they were an integral part of religion and life. Both animals became a part of the people’s understanding of life and religion. Understanding the importance and usage of hedgehogs and hyenas in the lives of ancient Egyptians allows modern day researchers to understand more fully the intricate aspects of these people, now long gone.