
Title of Object

Baboon (Moon God Thoth)

Photo of Object (optional)



Object Information

Artist: unknown

Country: Egypt

Date of Object: 7th-6th c BCE

File Created: 2/27/2018

Accession Number: 2017.27

Author of File: L Hicks

Material/Medium: Faience

Reviewer of File: Kara ZumBahlen

Department: Africa & Americas

Last Updated/Reviewed: 3/25/2018

Culture: Egyptian (Ancient Egyptian)

Tour Topics

Animals, religion, ancient culture, mythology, ritual/ceremony, writing, funerary/afterlife, gods/goddesses, Ancient Egypt, spirituality/sacred, Moon, baboon, symbolism

Questions and Activities (list 3 to 4 sample questions here):

Why do you think the artist made him blue? What might blue symbolize?

What qualities do baboons have that would make them a good representation of a god?

What sort of God would you want to be?

Key Points (Form: subject matter, medium and techniques of manufacture, style, etc.)

Thoth was one of the deities of the Egyptian pantheon. In art, he was often depicted as a man with the head of an ibis or a baboon, animals sacred to him. (Wikipedia)

The Baboon and its association with Thoth: From the beginning of Egyptian history, the baboon had a role in Egyptian religion. Initially, he was known as a deity called the "Great White One" (that is, the moon), but soon this god was conflated with Thoth, the better known ibis-headed god of writing and recording. Thoth's responsibilities included the calendar, which in ancient Egypt was lunar based, facilitating the integration of the two deities. (Baboon with wedjat eye, metmuseum.org)

The details are striking: from the two-layered fur to the coiffure, hands, and feet, everything is finely sculpted. Monkeys were kept as costly pets by the elite in ancient Egypt, yet their regal appearance and imposing presence also made them useful representations of gods in the Egyptian religion. For a 2,600-year-old artwork it is in remarkable condition, and though the animal is small in size, its posture and expression command authority. (artsmia.org)

From the Sotheby's report: Sacred to the moon god Thoth, seated on a pylon-shaped support rounded at the back and resting his forepaws on his knees, the tail curved around to one side, his cape-like mass of fur composed of echeloned vertically-striated lappets against a horizontally-striated ground, a naos pendant suspended on the chest, with incised mouth, recessed eyes beneath prominent arched brows, and human-like ears, a mortise for insertion of a headdress, probably the crescent and moon-disk, on the crown, a deep tapering recess under the support. (Sotheby's)

Egyptian faience: This material is neither earthenware nor tin-glazed. However, since there has been little agreement on an alternative term, "faience" remains the most commonly used. Egyptian faience is a ceramic material with a siliceous body and a brightly colored glaze. In addition to silica, faience also contains alkaline salts (the source of which was either natron or plant ash), minor amounts of lime, and a metallic colorant. Although faience was made in a range of bright colors, the turquoise blue color so characteristic of the material is created with copper. During the firing process, the alkali (acting as a flux) and the lime (acting as a stabilizer) react with the silica in the core to form a glaze on the surface. The humble raw materials for creating faience were available in the Egyptians' immediate surroundings. (metmuseum.org)

In ancient Egypt, objects created with faience were considered magical, filled with the undying shimmer of the sun, and imbued with the powers of rebirth. For Egyptians, the sculptures, vessels, jewelry, and ritual objects made of faience glimmered with the brilliance of eternity. While faience is made of common materials—quartz, alkaline salts, lime, and mineral-based colorants—it maintained important status among precious stones and metals. Faience may have been developed to simulate highly prized and rare semi-precious blue stones like turquoise. This man-made substance allowed the Egyptians to make a wide variety of objects covered in shiny, bright blue glaze—a color that was closely linked with fertility, life, and the gleaming qualities of the sun....Faience first appeared at the end of the fifth millennium B.C. and has occurred in various forms up to the present day....One of the most recognizable forms of faience are small figures of gods. (metmuseum.org)

There were various manufacturing methods for faience, but the most common was a self-glazing technique referred to as the "efflorescence method." To make faience with this glazing method, water-soluble alkaline salts are combined with powdered quartz, some lime, and a colorant (e.g., copper originating from metal shavings or

crushed copper-rich stones such as malachite). The dry ingredients are mixed with water to create a paste that is then formed into the desired shape....Faience cracks when bent, and has little ability to support its own weight. Due to these physical properties, faience cannot be formed into objects using the same techniques as potter's clay. Small amulets and beads could be formed by hand-modelling, but one of the most common ways to shape faience was with clay molds, as is evidenced by the multitude of faience molds found in the archaeological record. Another technique for working with faience is to form the paste around an organic core that burns away during firing. (metmuseum.org)

Whatever method is chosen for shaping and glazing, the dull, dry pieces of faience must be fired in a kiln to reveal their brilliant color. During firing, the alkaline components (e.g., the salty crust formed with the efflorescence method) react with the ground quartz, copper oxide, and lime to form a glaze. Most ancient faience objects have glaze covering their entire surface. Studies have shown that faience was fired at a temperature between 1598°F (870°C) and 1688°F (920°C). The ancient Egyptians placed a high value on this medium because of the brilliant blue color that could be created with humble, readily available components. Consequently, Egyptian faience persisted for an astonishing four millennia in the Nile Valley. (metmuseum.org)

Key Points (Context: use, history, cultural information, artist bio, etc.)

Thoth played many vital and prominent roles in Egyptian mythology, such as maintaining the universe, and being one of the two deities (the other being Ma'at) who stood on either side of Ra's boat. He served as a mediating power, especially between good and evil, making sure neither had a decisive victory over the other. In the later history of ancient Egypt, Thoth became heavily associated with the arbitration of godly disputes, the arts of magic, the system of writing, the development of science, and the judgment of the dead. His feminine counterpart was Seshat, and his wife was Ma'at. (Wikipedia)

Thoth's chief temple was located in the city of Khmun, later called Hermopolis Magna during the Greco-Roman era (in reference to him through the Greeks' interpretation that he was the same as their god Hermes) and Shmounein in the Coptic rendering. Khmun was partially destroyed in 1826 CE. In that city, he led the Ogdoad pantheon of eight principal deities. He also had numerous shrines within the cities of Abydos, Hesert, Urit, Per-Ab, Rekhui, Taur, Sep, Hat, Pselket, Talmsis, Antcha-Mutet, Bah, Amen-heri-ab, and Ta-kens. (Wikipedia)

In art, Thoth was usually depicted with the head of an ibis, possibly because the Egyptians saw curve of the ibis' beak as a symbol of the crescent moon. Sometimes, he was depicted as a baboon holding up a crescent moon, as the baboon was seen as a nocturnal and intelligent creature. The association with baboons led to him occasionally being said to have as a consort Astennu, one of the (male) baboons at the place of judgment in the underworld. On other occasions, Astennu was said to be Thoth himself. During the late period of Egyptian history, a cult of Thoth gained prominence due to its main centre, Khmun (Hermopolis Magna), also becoming the capital. Millions of dead ibis were mummified and buried in his honour. The rise of his cult also led to his cult seeking to adjust mythology to give Thoth a greater role. (Wikipedia)

Baboon amulets probably were offerings to shrines honoring Thoth, but could also have been placed with the deceased as a representative of the deity who recorded Osiris' judgment. (Baboon, metmuseum)

(From a researcher at University College London) The reason that Egyptians considered baboons to be sacred is actually quite straightforward. When baboons wake in the morning, like many primates (humans included), they tend to stretch and produce vocalisations. To some, the pose baboons adopt while stretching – sometimes raising their front legs in the air – resembles worship. As they stretch more often at sunrise, this action together with their

'chattering' noises when moving from sleeping sites, was interpreted as singing and dancing to praise the Sun-god, Ra. This only explains the role of language in making baboons sacred. Of several Gods to whom they are sacred, the deity who links baboons unequivocally with language is Thoth. Thoth is often depicted as a baboon scribe who not only spoke and wrote, but who actually gave the gift of language to the Egyptians, rather than simply understanding it.... Ancient Egyptians recognised the human-like intelligence, ability to communicate and dexterity of baboons that we are equally fascinated by today, albeit from an evolutionary science perspective, rather than a religious sensibility. (Suzanne Harvey, UCL)

Current Mia Label Information (optional)

Monkeys were kept as costly pets by the elite in ancient Egypt, yet their regal appearance and imposing presence also made them useful representations of gods in the Egyptian religion. The baboon was usually associated with Thoth, one of the moon gods. This animal has a hole in the crown that once held a lunar disk sitting on top of a crescent moon, an attribute of Thoth. For a 2600-year-old artwork it is in remarkable condition, and, though the animal is small in size, its posture and expression command authority.

Sources of Information and/or Prop Ideas (photos/videos)

Egyptian Faience: Technology and Production by Carolyn Riccardelli, Department of Objects Conservation, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, December 2017:

https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/egfc/hd_egfc.htm

Baboon with a wedjat eye: <https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/44.4.41/>

New accession at Mia: <https://collections.artsmia.org/art/126884/baboon-egypt/accessionHighlight>

Thoth: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thoth>

Suzanne Harvey University College London: <http://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/researchers-in-museums/tag/baboon-deities/>

Sotheby's auction listing: <http://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2015/antiquities-n09438/lot.38.html>

Baboons with representation of lunar disk: <https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/66.99.73/>

