

If Animals Could Talk: What two Animal-Shaped objects
tell us about the Ancient World

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Introduction

Artifacts recovered from ancient times have the ability to tell stories about the societies that they were once a part of. Upon examining an ancient object, one can gain insight to the object itself as well as the society that utilized it. Furthermore, when multiple objects are examined, one is able to glean a broader awareness of the ancient world and what about it these objects represent. Two particular objects from the University of Michigan's Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, a bull figurine from the Jackier collection and a snake coffin from the permanent display, represent prime examples of commonly used symbols from the Eastern Mediterranean and Egyptian worlds. Animal symbols are arguably as relevant today as they were in ancient societies. To note, one of the most recognizable symbols of the United States is the bald eagle and the freedom it represents. Due to their relevance and their representation of major cultural ideas, animal symbols should be studied in order to supplement one's grasp of the ancient world. Although each object is no bigger than 15 centimeters, the bull figurine and snake coffin collectively offer substantial insight into animal symbolism from the Late Bronze and Late Ptolemaic periods as well as insight into the ancient civilizations from which they originated. This paper will take a comprehensive approach to each object in order to find out what can be learned about each object, the ancient world, and animal symbolism in general.

Description of the Bull Figurine

By comparing the Jackier collection's bull figurine to an object of similar appearance, I was able to infer that this figurine is a weight in the shape of a Zebu bull. The feature that distinguishes this bull as a *Zebu* bull is the tall hump between its shoulders (Levine 149). The main dimensions of the bull include a maximum height of 4.7 cm, a maximum width of 1.6 cm

(not including the width between the horns), a maximum length of 6.6 cm from nose to tail, and a weight of 72.9 grams. This figure lacks intricate detail but has all of the basic characteristics of a Zebu bull: horns, eyes, ears, tall hump between the shoulders, and a small tail protruding from the rear. When taking a closer look, one may notice some of the finite detailing such as two miniscule nostrils in a slightly darker grey color as compared to the rest of the body and a second hump hiding behind the main hump which is about a third of the size of the larger one. When examining the length of the bull's underside, one may notice a rectangular hole that creates a deep, hollow opening. This opening may have once held a lead plug that helped adjust the bull's weight, but the heavy lead must have fallen through the undercarriage overtime (Levine 155). In hopes of understanding the full picture of the bull figurine, one must gain as full of a description of the object as one can, starting with the basic dimensions and appearance.

In addition to assisting in the classification of the Zebu bull, a comparable bull figurine that was found in a Beth Shemesh excavation in 2007 helps assess the condition and material of the Jackier bull (Levine 146). Most of the Jackier bull's body is a light tan color with a reddish undertone. Unfortunately, there are a number of places throughout the bull's body that have worn away because of erosion, and as a result, those spots reveal a dark grey, metallic material with hints of teal, plausibly from oxidation. The finish of the Beth Shemesh bull is smoother to touch and has more of a metallic shine than the Jackier bull; this appearance is more apt to reflect what the original condition of both of the weights looked like. Although their conditions are different, both weights appear to be made of bronze because of their metallic properties. Clay was another commonly used material for weights in that time period, but the Jackier figurine weighs more than a clay weight and it has a similar appearance to the Beth Shemesh bronze bull (Levine 151).

While they may seem trivial, the figurine's details assist in classifying the object and guiding one's exploration of the object's context.



The Beth Shemesh Weight (Levine Fig.1)

Basic Interpretations of the Bull Figurine

Since the bull figurine was loaned to the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, there is a limited amount of accessible information regarding its origins except for what is known about similar objects such as the Beth Shemesh bull. The Beth Shemesh bull was discovered in Israel; however, Zebu weights were more common in Lebanon and Syria than Israel (Levine 146). While there is not enough evidence to say that the Jackier bull figurine is from Israel, it is probable that it originated somewhere in the Levant region of the Eastern Mediterranean. For a while, it was difficult to find evidence of Zebu bulls in that region because the only distinct feature of the animal is its curved spine, but the earliest major piece of evidence of Zebu in the southern Levant was discovered in the Late Bronze Age levels (Levine 151). Assuming the

figurine is from the Levant, it could have been produced as early as the Late Bronze Age because that was when the actual breed of animal began to appear in that area. Furthermore, it is unlikely that the figurine existed before this period because no examples of Zebu artistic representations were found in the Levant or Egypt prior to the Late Bronze age (Levine 151). Knowing the geographical and chronological origins of an object leaves one to wonder how it was physically produced. Due to the bull's symmetry, it was most likely modeled using casting techniques rather than by hand. Casting would have been a practical technique for the craftsmen to shape this bronze figure because it involves pouring molten metal into a shaped mold and joining two halves, creating a symmetrical piece (Darvill). The only drawback to this assessment is that objects made from casting typically have a line going down the center from where the two halves were joined, and this object has finished edges with no visible lines (Darvill). If this bull was made by casting, the line was either well disguised, or it disappeared over time because of erosion. Interpreting where, when, and how an object was created sets the stage for understanding *why* it was created in the first place.

From the earlier description, it has been determined that the bull figurine is a type of weight, but the function of this weight has not been entirely established. It is likely that the bull shaped weight carried significant value because actual bulls and oxen were used as general measures of value by several ancient cultures (Hendin 37). Bovine have served a number of roles in ancient and contemporary society, so it is no surprise that they were incorporated into a trade weight systems and given more value. The Jackier bull figurine could have been valued by how much it weighs and how much it assisted the exchange of other goods (Nevett). Having been made out of bronze, the bull's weight would have been correlated with how much it was worth

because the heavier it was, the more bronze it carried. With this in mind, the owners of the weight could have melted it down for its material or sold it to someone else who wanted to do the same. Moreover, the bull weight's original purpose was probably to assist in the commerce of other goods. In ancient times, units of measure such as talents or shekels were applied to trade weights, and they represented how much of a load could be carried by a man (Hendin 39). For instance, this Zebu bull weight would have been placed on one end of a balance and the goods being traded would be placed at the other end; the weight of the bull figurine would have been compared to the weight of the other goods, and merchants could determine how much those goods were worth in comparison to the bull and how many could be transported. Since this weight was used in everyday scenarios, one is able to forge interpretations about what daily life was like in the Levant.

Life in the Levant

By compiling the evidence that has been gathered so far, we are able to paint a picture about life in the Levant region around the Late Bronze age and how it was influenced by the Zebu bull. From religion to economics to everyday life, the Zebu bull's influence could have been noticed by most residents of the Levant region. Zebu cattle were able to provide meat, hides, milk, and power to their owners (Levine 150). With all of their uses, these cattle would have been an integral part of survival for families. Additionally, they would have been in high demand due to their several benefits; therefore, it would have been likely that only the most wealthy residents would be able to own a Zebu bull unless there were enough to go around. The Levant region is known for its prolonged dry spells that lead to water shortage and damage to agriculture (Saaroni et. al., 2223). These dry spells would have made the Zebus' roles that much

more important because residents would not have been able to get their food from crops. Similarly, Zebu bulls would have been more practical than other types of livestock during dry spells because Zebus could pull more weight on less food (Levine 150). The citizens of the Levant region during the Late Bronze age represent perseverance and the ability to adapt in tough conditions, and Zebus were one of the main catalysts for helping survival. Outside of their literal use, bulls in general were used as religious symbols. Bulls like the Zebu bull are typically pictured with a storm god riding on their backs (Levine 152). In fact, the storm deity was described as a young bull in biblical and regional texts (Levine 152). It makes sense why bulls were worshipped in association with deities because these livestock were a key aspect in sustaining life. Furthermore, the craftsman who chose to produce our trade weight might have chosen the shape of a Zebu because these bulls played such an important role in everyday and religious life. This trade weight incorporates the Zebu bull into the economic affairs of the region and is able to show modern day scholars that the people of the region were involved with trade (Levine 157). Many aspects of Levantine society go hand in hand. Life in the Levant region was richly influenced by agricultural, religious, and economic factors of the region.

Description of the Snake Coffin

While handling an object (like I was able to do with the bull figurine) gives the viewer an extra level of perspective, studying an object on display can still give one a fairly detailed description. Located in the permanent Ancient Egypt exhibition in Kelsey Museum, the snake coffin (museum #4673) surpasses the bull figurine in size with a width of 4.2 cm, a length of 8.8 cm, a height of 11.4 cm, and a weight of 275 grams (Encina). From a viewer's perspective, the first thing the eye is drawn to is the tall rearing snake on top of a base. Although the object is a

snake coffin, the snake on the outside is in a lively position. Sitting up tall with its hood fanned and the rest of its body loosely coiled beneath it, the snake looks like it is ready to strike. Along the snake's vertebrae, there are detailed horizontal ridges. Its face is composed of deeply set eyes, two nostrils, and a slight impression of a mouth. This snake is sitting upon a rectangular object that resembles a brick, presumably where the deceased snake is contained. The museum display informs visitors that the coffin is made of bronze (Museum display). With a consistent blue-green color, the bronze snake coffin has experienced oxidation just as the bull figurine had. Compared to the bull figurine, the coffin's color is recognizably greener. The variation in color between the two objects may be a result of climate and/or age differences. Although the snake coffin's description is not as detailed as the bull figurine's, the coffin's description still carries as much significance for interpreting the object's context.

Basic Interpretations of the Snake Coffin

When an object is on display in a museum, guesswork about its origins can be minimized because it is organized with similar objects and a description is usually provided on display. One can assume that the snake coffin originates from Egypt because it is located in the Kelsey Museum's Ancient Egypt Exhibition, and its original location can be attributed to the hints that the object itself gives. For example, the rearing cobra on top of the coffin is a commonly found symbol in Egypt and has been for about 3000 years (Josephson 123). Evidence for this symbol's prevalence has been seen among several cities within the Egyptian empire (Szpakowska 113). It is unlikely that this symbol would have appeared in places outside of the empire unless it was a product of Egyptian influence. The time period from which this coffin originated is more complicated to define since, similar to what was stated earlier, the symbol of rearing cobras has

been in Egypt for thousands of years. At the museum, the display states that the coffin is from Late Ptolemaic Periods (Museum display). This would have been an appropriate time period to associate with the object because deification of Ptolemaic rulers was common in Egypt, and rearing cobras were commonly connected to deities and royalty (Sidebotham 619). To gain another layer of insight, it is important to attempt to understand how the coffin was crafted. The manner in which the rearing snake is connected to the base of the coffin appears to be a product of carving. Since the base of the coffin appears to be a block of bronze, the coffin as a whole could have been chiseled from a larger block to begin with (Clarke et. al.). It is not likely that the creation of this object was achieved by another technique such as casting because it would have been difficult to make the object in two pieces and join them after because the body of the snake is narrow. While one may have easily assumed the origins of the snake coffin, it is important to understand why the coffin could not have been from anywhere else.

The use of the object is evident from its name: the snake coffin. It is easy for one to infer that this object houses a deceased snake, but since a snake coffin is somewhat unusual in modern society, it leaves one to wonder about what the object's place in Ancient Egyptian society was. Considering that rearing cobras were associated with Egyptian deities and religion, the snake inside of the coffin may have been highly regarded. In fact, the growth in use of sacred animals in Ancient Egyptian religion can be seen from their use as burial chamber decoration (Collins 104). It is safe to assume that this snake coffin would not have been alone, but instead, it would have accompanied a deceased individual. This snake coffin may not have been created for the sole purpose of housing a lifeless snake; it may have been a part of larger religious burial ritual.

Life in Ancient Egypt

A symbol that outlived generations of people during the Late-Ptolemaic Periods, the rearing cobra and the snake coffin it sits upon, gives one an insider's look at religion and nobility in Ancient Egypt. The snake has the Egyptian goddess Wadjet to thank for its religious associations because the goddess was often depicted as a cobra (Darvill). This religious symbol, also known as the Uraeus, has also been used as a royal symbol since the earliest representations of the king in Ancient Egypt (Josephson 123). Often appearing on the foreheads of pharaohs, the cobra would have been seen by all members of the Egyptian Empire and associated with the royalty who wore it (Leeming). The symbol of the rearing cobra offers protection for its owners, for it was once used by commoners and nobility for everyday practices as well as more ceremonial practices like burials. With its extended hood, the cobra symbol takes a threatening form, indicating that it is ready to strike (Josephson 123). As a result of its threatening appearance, the Uraeus was used in religious spells and rituals to ward off nightmares (Szpakowska 114). For the same reason individuals thought the cobra would ward off nightmares, the symbol or an actual deceased snake may have been placed in burial chambers of a person to ward off demons or tomb robbers. Additionally, this symbol may have appeared more commonly in burial sites of the nobility because they would have been able to afford chamber decorations and the symbol might have been a sign to visitors that the site housed a royal body. What this symbol is able to offer about Ancient Egyptian society as a whole is that it may have been characterized by a certain level of fear and superstition. Although the meaning of the Uraeus may have evolved over the thousands of years it has existed, the fact that the symbol has survived for so long shows one that it has represented a common ideology of Ancient

Egyptians. If this symbol has enough prestige to be associated with deities and royalty, it likely offers immense usefulness for interpreting what life was like in Ancient Egypt.

Conclusion

When studied together, the bull figurine and the snake coffin offer insight into the use of animal symbolism in the ancient world and even the modern world. While spoken language can change over time and geographical regions, symbols can help spread messages among people. Places like the Levant and Egypt used animals to create a symbolic language in order to visually communicate theoretical ideas (Collins 98). Common messages that the Zebu bull and the rearing snake represented were ones associated with regional deities and protection from fear or hardship. With all of the connections that can be made between the bull figurine and the snake coffin, one may ask, “Why do societies continuously create symbols of animals?” Whether it is their practicality to farming or their threatening disposition, animals have characteristics that speak to grander meanings of life within different cultures while still being understandable by a normal citizen.

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