

## **A Unique Humorous Wooden Model of a Boat Trip Housed in Cairo Agricultural Museum No.688<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

The paper entitled ‘A Unique Humorous Wooden Model of a Boat Trip Housed in Cairo Agricultural Museum No.688’ deals with a mysterious topic in Egyptology. In brief, it draws attention to a wooden model coated with plaster of a cat with a mouse in a boat trip from Deir-El Medineh, New kingdom period, via a description of it, following a zoological description of the cat and the mouse. This study demonstrates that this model has a religious purpose not a cynical or political purpose.

### **Introduction**

This model caught my eye when I saw it the first time in the agricultural museum because it is a unique not in topic but in idea and material. Many writers wrote about humorous scenes and satirical works in ancient Egypt, but this is a distinctive model. The researcher will describe and comment on this model in order to receive useful results, to enable us to answer the question that needs to be answered: why this unique humorous model was made, or what is the purpose of it?

### **Documentation**

Reg. no. 688

Provenance: Deir-El Medineh

Dimensions: Length 33cm.

Substance: Wood coated with plaster

Dating: New kingdom period

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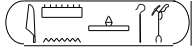
<sup>1</sup> I would like to express my thanks to the general inspector of expositions and Agricultural Museums, Mohamed Alaa, also I want to thank the director of the Cairo Agricultural Museum, Mohamed Ezzat, for giving me permission to publish this object. Further thanks are due to the Journal of the General Union of Arab Archaeologists referees for their comments; the present paper owes much to their recommendations.

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Text: In front of the two figurines of the cat and the mouse, an inscription, in black ink, can be read:



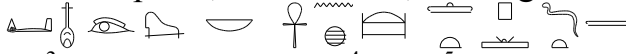
*nb m3t r stpt r*



*imn htp hk3 w3st* (Amenhotep ,The Third)

Beside the two royal cartouches a verb can be read: *3bh* 'be united'.<sup>2</sup> Probably it refers to the union of the King with his creator or with the eternity or with Osiris in the underworld.

Behind the two figurines of the cat and the mouse, there is an inscription, in black ink, reading:



*di<sup>3</sup> nfr Wsir (n) nb nh<sup>4</sup> htpw<sup>5</sup> dt*

‘Grant good Osiris ‘the dead king’ peace in the sarcophagus forever’

It is the first time so far that we find a humorous statuette of a cat and a mouse in a picnic boat. In addition, it is the first time that we find inscriptions on it or on humorous scenes in general.

### Description and the commentary:

A wooden model was coated with plaster of a cat with a mouse in a boat trip (fig.1), when artists used wood for statues; they executed the initial rough work with saws and axes. Also the adze (cutting tool) and the chisel could be used to shape the statue. Artists would often smooth wood surfaces with abrasives before and after they were done sculpting. However, much of the surface of a wooden statue was layered with plaster and then the artists applied color. Maybe, the addition of plaster and paint often enclosed the poor quality of the local wood.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Revise: R.O.Faulkner, *A Concise Dictionary of Middle Egyptian* (Oxford, 1976), 2; A.Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Oxford, 1957), 538(Z9).

<sup>3</sup>Revise: Faulkner, *A Concise Dictionary of Middle Egyptian*, 155,309.

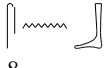
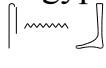
<sup>4</sup> *nb nh* means sarcophagus. Revise: *Wb.*, II, 228(14).

<sup>5</sup>Revise: Faulkner, *A Concise Dictionary of Middle Egyptian*, 180.

<sup>6</sup>Revise: Edward Bleiberg, *Arts and Humanities through the Eras: Ancient Egypt (2675 B.C.E.–332 B.C.E.)*(New York, 2004), 268.

## **The boat**

The boat <sup>7</sup> was known in ancient Egypt as:

1-  snbt Old kingdom,  Greco-Roman Period.

2-  ,  k r New kingdom <sup>9</sup>

There are other words refer to ship <sup>10</sup> as: *idp*, *wi3*, *hw*, *hn-ih*, *kwr*, *dpt* and *dpw*. <sup>11</sup> The word *trt* refers to barque <sup>12</sup> in general. <sup>13</sup>

The oldest datable boat representations are models. The very oldest seems to be from Neolithic site of Merimda Beni Salama, others almost as old come from the Badarian culture of Upper Egypt, 5500 to 400BC(fig.2) <sup>14</sup>. These are models of true boats with built-up sides. Vinson says ' *However, it seems most likely that the boats they represented were made of papyrus bundles, not wood. This is because there is no evidence that at this period carpentry skills were advanced enough to built planked boats, and Egypt never had enough large straight trees to build dugout canoes* '. <sup>15</sup>

The type of the boat model, which the researcher studies, resembles the type of sporting- boat <sup>16</sup> this model is carved and

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<sup>7</sup> The word boat different from the word ship and barque in ancient Egyptian language, revise: *Wb.*, VI, 130-31; *Wb.*, VI, 17. The word boat points to:

1. A small craft or vessel designed to float on, and provide transport over, or under, water.  
2. Naval slang for a submarine of any size, see: Glossary of nautical terms, in: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glossary\\_of\\_nautical\\_terms](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glossary_of_nautical_terms) but in this paper the researcher means only the small craft which designed to float on , and provide transport over, water

<sup>8</sup>*Wb.*, IV, 161(11).

<sup>9</sup>*Wb.*, V, 134(15).

<sup>10</sup>Generally now refers to most medium or large vessels outfitted with smaller boats. See: Glossary of nautical terms, in:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glossary\\_of\\_nautical\\_terms](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glossary_of_nautical_terms)

<sup>11</sup>Revise: *Wb.*, VI, 130-31.

<sup>12</sup> Generally now refers to a sailing vessel of three or more masts, See: Glossary of nautical terms, in:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glossary\\_of\\_nautical\\_terms](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glossary_of_nautical_terms)

<sup>13</sup>Revise: *Wb.*, VI, 17.

<sup>14</sup> S.Vinson, *Egyptian Boats and Ships*,(London,1994),11,fig.2.

<sup>15</sup>Revise: Vinson, *Egyptian Boats and Ships*, 11, fig.2.

<sup>16</sup>Revise: D. Jones, *Ancient Egyptian Boats* (London, 1995) 28, fig.23.




shaped from a single solid block of wood. It is coated with a thin layer of gesso (white plaster) and painted.<sup>17</sup>

In ancient Egypt, boats carried Egyptian officials and tax collectors on their rounds and they carried stones for pyramids or temples. They hauled grain, wine, beer, cattle, oils, and other food from farms and workshops to markets. They brought luxury goods from East Africa or the Mediterranean to the royal palaces and temple estates. Boats were the means by which traveling traders peddled their goods, and by which public traveled from village to village. Boats carried Egyptian armies south into the Sudan and north to Palestine. Boats carried the statues of the gods from temple to temple.<sup>18</sup>

Even as religious focus, the boat remained the celestial vehicle of the gods. It was assumed that it joined the gods in heaven by more divine means. According to ancient Egyptian theology many of gods and pharaohs have barques as the god Re's morning barque and evening barque, Divine barques of the pharaohs, and the ferry of the god Osiris. For the dead, the boat was the mode of travel to the "Beautiful West" where Osiris resided.<sup>19</sup>

### **The cat**

The cat was known in ancient Egypt as:

 *miw*, var. det. <sup>20</sup>, fem.  *mit*<sup>21</sup>

It was written in Coptic: <sup>s</sup>emou, pl. emooue.<sup>22</sup>

Cats and rats were found in great numbers in ancient Egypt everywhere, in roads, houses and necropolises to hunt other scavengers and to gain the food offerings placed with the

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<sup>17</sup>Cf. Jones, *Ancient Egyptian Boats*, 26, fig.23.

<sup>18</sup>Reise: Vinson, *Egyptian Boats and Ships*, 7.

<sup>19</sup> Igor Medvedev-Mead, "Soul Boats", *The San Francisco Jung Institute Library Journal*, Vol. 24, No. 3, August (2005), 18, 23-4

; <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/jung.1.2005.24.3.10>; M. Lurker, *The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Egypt* (London, 1980) 31-32.

<sup>20</sup> Faulkner, *A Concise Dictionary of Middle Egyptian*, 104.

<sup>21</sup> *Wb. II*, 42(4-7).

<sup>22</sup> W.E. Crum, *A Coptic Dictionary* (Oxford, 1939), 55b.

dead.<sup>23</sup> The oldest indication of a relationship between cats and humans in Egypt extends back to the Badarian period, numerous early pre dynastic human burials at al-Badari and al-Mustagidda were found to have small cats interred along with them.<sup>24</sup> The cat belongs to the family *felidae*.<sup>25</sup> Judging from the archeology evidence, two closely related species of wildcat, (*Felis libyca*) and (*F. Chaus*), seem to have been simultaneously brought into domestication by the ancient Egyptians. Although specimens of (*F.libyca*) were much more common, it is also possible that specimens of (*F. serval*) were imported into Egypt from the south, they also figured in the domestication process.<sup>26</sup>

As the African wildcat (*F. libyca*) has a close relative of ancient Egyptian domesticated cats it is also a distant ancestor of many of our cats.<sup>27</sup> It is much more lightly built than (*f. chaus*). Its head and body length c.600 mm that makes the tail, measuring c.350mm, proportionally long, and the ears are not tufted. The legs are long when compared with modern cats. The body color can vary greatly according to the surroundings but the markings of the fur are a main feature. Pale sandy fawn is the most common color, with a rufous line on the back and multiple transverse stripes of the same color, though paler on the body. These may also appear on the head and usually extend to the legs. The black- tipped tail is ringed.<sup>28</sup>

The length of the head and the body of the marsh cat (*F. Chaus*) is c.650-750mm; it has long legs. Their chief characteristic are: a relatively short tail, c.250-300mm. its ears are long and tufted. These cats weigh about 3-5and 6:5 kg. They

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<sup>23</sup> D. M. Dixon , “ A Note on Some Scavengers of Ancient Egypt ” , *World Archaeology*, Vol. 21, No. 2, *The Archaeology of Public Health* , Oct.,( 1989), 194-95  
;http://www.jstor.org/stable/124908

<sup>24</sup> P. F. Houlihan, *The Animal of the Pharaohs* (AUC, 1995), 81.

<sup>25</sup> J. Malek, *The Cat in Ancient Egypt* ( London, 1993), 22.

<sup>26</sup> James Allen Baldwin, “Notes and Speculations on the Domestication of the Cat in Egypt“, *Anthropos*, Bd. 70, H. 3./4. (1975), 442http://www.jstor.org/stable/40458771.

<sup>27</sup> P. F. Houlihan, *The Animal of the Pharaohs*, 80; Malek, *The Cat in Ancient Egypt*, 24.

<sup>28</sup> Malek, *The Cat in Ancient Egypt*, 24.

are generally plain colored without distinctive body marks, ranging from light rosy brown or sandy fawn to grey, with black tipped ears and tail, and with faint stripes on the head, a darker dorsal line and stripes on the upper legs and the tail.<sup>29</sup> It seems from the long tail, and not tufted ears that the cat which on the boat, descends from a species of (*Felis libyca*).

Cats were domesticated in ancient Egypt for two reasons first; they had been prepared for domestication by a long era of loose association with man. Second, they had become the manifestations of two of the major deities of ancient Egypt, Re and Bastet.<sup>30</sup> Because the cat was aggressive to snakes, it became a sacred animal of the sun god. In the New Kingdom, the male cat was regarded as a personification of the sun god and the female cat was equated with the solar eye.<sup>31</sup> In addition, the domestic cat was a sacred animal of Bastet.<sup>32</sup>

### **The mouse**

The mouse was known in ancient Egypt as:

 *pnw*, var. det. <sup>33</sup>

It was written in Coptic: <sup>s</sup>.pin, <sup>b</sup>.fin.<sup>34</sup>

Mice belong to one of the most successful mammalian orders, the *Rodentia*, which enclose over 3000 species of these small herbivorous gnawing animals. Their large chisel-shaped incisor teeth characterize them and their distribution is wide. Their success is largely owing to their rapid rate of reproduction. Mice, squirrels, beavers, voles, guinea pigs and porcupines are included in the order *Rodentia*.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>29</sup>Malek, *The Cat in Ancient Egypt*, 24-5.

<sup>30</sup> Baldwin, *Anthropos*, Bd. 70, H. 3. /4. (1975), 443;  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40458771>.

<sup>31</sup> M.Lurker , *An Illustrated Dictionary of The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Egypt* (London ,1996) 39.

<sup>32</sup> Lurker , *An Illustrated Dictionary of The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Egypt*,39.

<sup>33</sup> *Wb.I*, 508(6).

<sup>34</sup> Crum , *A Coptic Dictionary*,263a.

<sup>35</sup>T.A.G.Wells, *The Rat, A practical Guide*,2<sup>nd</sup> ed.( London,1968) 3.

The Egyptian spiny mouse (*Acomys cahirinus*) distributed through Africa and the Middle East, but it was first discovered in Egypt<sup>36</sup>.its defining feature is the gray-brown to sandy spiny hairs covering its back. The large-eared animal has a gray to white belly and a scaly, hairless tail.<sup>37</sup>

The external features of the mouse consist of a head, neck, trunk, and tail.

The head: the features of the head representative of the Rodentia order have two ears. The snout protrudes and contains two external nostrils. Posterior to the rostrum is the mouth, which is bordered by fleshy lips; a cleft is in the center of the upper lip. The two eyes are dorsal to the mouth on both sides of the head and are bounded by upper and lower eyelids.

The neck: the neck provides support for the head, which it enables to move sense the external environment.<sup>38</sup>

The trunk: the trunk of the rat consists of a cranial thorax and a caudal abdomen. The upper appendages are attached to the thorax and the lower appendages are attached to the caudal base of the abdomen.

The tail: The tail of the mouse is quite long, often nearly as long as the trunk. It contains spars hairs along its length<sup>39</sup>, or a scaly, hairless tail.<sup>40</sup>

### **Commentary on the model**

In this model, the cat is lying on a boat and the mouse in front of it, as appears from the movement of the kneeling legs and curved tail of the cat; the cat does not attack the mouse or chase him but promenades with him on the boat. It seems that the cat takes the mouse in a picnic.

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<sup>36</sup>Nathan S. Welton , “ Rats, mice, and relatives III, Old World rats and mice (Murinae) ” , in: D. G. Kleiman, V. Geist and M. C. McDade (eds), *Grzimek's Animal Life Encyclopedia*, 16, Mammals V,2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (New York, 2003)259.

<sup>37</sup> Welton , “ Rats, mice, and relatives III, Old World rats and mice (Murinae) ”,259.

<sup>38</sup>Revise: B. D. Wingerd and G. Stien, *Rat Dissection Manual* (Carolina ,1988)1.

<sup>39</sup>Revise: Wingerd and Stien, *Rat Dissection Manual*, 2.

<sup>40</sup> Welton , “ Rats, mice, and relatives III, Old World rats and mice (Murinae) ”,259.

In ancient Egyptian culture, there remains a marked content of Egyptian art and literature, which describe as purposely humorous. There are many Papyri most Egyptologists think that they include satirical vignettes, in which animals ape human activities, but in a topsy-turvy world, they act against their natural instincts.<sup>41</sup>

Many images of cats in a series of drawings on papyri and ostraca, most of which date to the New Kingdom and probably come from the Workmen's Village at Deir el Medina, in cartoon-type drawings, cats are shown undertaking various human actions, seated on chairs, feasting, preparing their make-up and being waited on by rats<sup>42</sup>. One of these Papyri dating to 1150B.C. is in the Egyptian museum in Cairo, it is showing a mouse, is being pampered and served by cats, a baby mouse is depicted in the arms of loving cat nurse<sup>43</sup> (fig.3).<sup>44</sup>

Margaret R. Bunson says ' *As the social order of the nation eroded, the satirical drawings served as a warning and as an incisive commentary on the breakdown of society*'.<sup>45</sup> While Jaromir Malek mentioned, these delightful scenes tell us much about real life in ancient Egypt and the attitudes of the poorer members of the population to the wealthy, and they refer to the wastage of the pride of the ownership before a fall.<sup>46</sup>

E. R. Russmann considered most of the 'animal fable' vignettes a satirical works as a reaction to the society in which they were produced.<sup>47</sup> Russmann said that '*this was a period of recurrent political tensions within the royal family and*

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<sup>41</sup>E.R. Russmann, "Papyrus with Satirical Vignettes" in: E.R. Russmann (ed.), *Eternal Egypt: Masterworks of Ancient Art from the British Museum*, (California, 2001)167.

<sup>42</sup> Revise: Malek, *The Cat in Ancient Egypt*, 112-22.

<sup>43</sup>Margaret R. Bunson, *Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*, Rev. ed. (New York, 2002)355; revise also: J. Stephen Lang, *1,001 things you always wanted to know about cats* (New York, 2004) 226; Malek, *The Cat in Ancient Egypt*, 121, fig.99.

<sup>44</sup> Malek, *The Cat in Ancient Egypt*, 121, fig.99.

<sup>45</sup> Bunson, *Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*, Rev. ed., 355.

<sup>46</sup> Malek, *The Cat in Ancient Egypt*, 112-22.

<sup>47</sup> Russmann, "Papyrus with Satirical Vignettes", 167.





G. Luck says '*Laughter as part of worship is attested in ancient Egypt as well as in Asia Minor. It is an expression of joy over the return, the resurrection, of a deity*'.<sup>55</sup> The resurrection of Osiris associated with fun and joke at the relief of the temple of Dendera.<sup>56</sup> The third day of the festival in honor of Osiris found again, When Osiris, the redeemer is born, all of nature rejoices.<sup>57</sup> In addition, S. Sauneron said the priests and the domestic servants of the dead might be put in good humor to perform their divine tasks.<sup>58</sup>

The model under study includes two royal cartouches to the king Amenhotep the Third, (inscribed on the boat), and a funerary text to him. Therefore, the model has not a satirical intent of royal life. Maybe it was a votive model to the king to delight him so that he can be resurrected as Osiris in the afterlife. In addition, the humor model puts the priests and the domestic servants of the dead king in good humor to perform their divine tasks. Accordingly, this humorous model embodies religious symbolism. Maybe this model would be needed by the deceased king in the after life for pleasure.<sup>59</sup> Also technical status of cat-and-mouse confirms the religious eschatological significance: live in peace, where the artist deliberated to put the cat behind the mouse without harassment, while it is clear that the mouse is not in the case of an escape from his inevitable fate in front of the cat as it happens in the world.

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<sup>55</sup>G.Luck, *Ancient Pathways & Hidden Pursuits, Religion, Morals and Magic in Ancient World*, 4<sup>th</sup>ed.( Michigan, 2003)266.

<sup>56</sup>R.Clarck, *The Spiritual Practice Restored: The Sacred Magic of Ancient Egypt*, 1st ed. (New York, 2003), 370.

<sup>57</sup> Luck, *Ancient Pathways & Hidden Pursuits, Religion, Morals and Magic in Ancient World*, 4th ed., 266.

<sup>58</sup>S. Sauneron, *The Priests of Ancient Egypt*, (New York, 2000), 75.

<sup>59</sup>Revise: Jones, *Ancient Egyptian Boats*, 26, fig.23.

## Conclusion

This humorous model was inscribed with two royal cartouches and funerary text. The inscriptions demonstrate that it has a religious purpose, not satirical. Thus, maybe most of the humorous scenes that were depicting whether on papyri or ostraca include the same meaning if they were compared to this model. Also this model emphasizes the religious eschatological significance: live in peace in the afterworld.

## The figures



(Fig.1, a)



(Fig.1, b)



(Fig.1, c)



(Fig.1, d) A humorous wooden model of a boat trip, Cairo Agricultural Museum No.688  
(Photograph by the author)



**(Fig.2)Badarian boat model, (Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, University College London.UC9024)**

S.Vinson, *Egyptian Boats and Ships*,(London,1994),11,fig.2.



**(Fig.3) A procession of cats as household servants attending to a seated lady mouse or rat, the cat is carrying a baby mouse in a sling. Cairo, Egyptian Museum**

J.Malek, *The Cat in Ancient Egypt*, (London,1993),121,fig.99.