

# **Sink Your Teeth In: The Influence of Two Physically Identifiable Snakes on Ancient Egyptian Serpent Depictions**

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## **Abstract**

Art was a large part of ancient Egyptian culture, driven by the importance of preserving their lives and their world and it created a storyline of physical art that we can follow today. With snakes so prevalent in society, having strong ties to their royalty, their religions and their daily lives, it is logical to assume that their imagery would be intertwined with the art culture among other reasons; their geographic commonality and the danger they posed to individuals, their physical body language of each specific species, a human need to comprehend and subsequently own things that they fear, and their cultural symbolic importance in many facets of Egyptian society.

This thesis focuses on two very different snakes, both deadly to humans and found commonly in the most populated areas of Egypt. The inclusion of these two specific species satisfy different sets of information and they are both important to ancient Egyptian imagery because they are the only two types of snakes depicted in this time period that can be visually recognized from their unique physical features and traits. With the ample archaeological evidence presented, this research and my following theories explore the following statement: serpent imagery of ancient Egyptian art features two physically identifiable species of snakes from everyday life that each fulfill important cultural roles.

## **1. Introduction**

Serpent imagery of ancient Egyptian art features two physically identifiable species of snakes from everyday life that each fulfill important cultural roles. With relations to religion, royalty and mythology, snakes evoke a duality of contradictory feelings of fear and veneration that ancient Egyptians artistically explored. There are a variety of reasons these snakes influenced the artistic depictions of serpents more profound than simply their geographic commonality and the danger they pose to individuals. The physical body language of each specific species, a human need to comprehend and subsequently own things that they fear, and their cultural symbolic importance in many facets of Egyptian society affect the intrigue.

Art was important to ancient Egyptians, so much so that not only do modern historians continuously discuss the importance after seeing dynasty after dynasty of artifacts uncovered, but the Greek historian known as Herodotus, from 2,500 years ago wrote, "Concerning Egypt itself I shall extend my remarks to a great length, because there is no country that possesses so many wonders, nor any that has such a number of works that defy description."<sup>1</sup> This comment shows that even before the modern age of art history, where resources and information are most accessible, people saw how far ahead Egypt was progressing with their intellectual pursuits.

Furthermore, art was such a large part of Egyptian culture, driven by the importance of preserving their lives and their world that it created a storyline of physical art that we can follow today. Pharaohs' legacies were preserved in the form of sculptural art, temple reliefs, and frescos, with the construction of pyramids and temples spanning decades

and centuries. With snakes so prevalent in society, having strong ties to their royalty, their religions and their daily lives, it is logical to assume that their imagery would be intertwined with the art culture.

The fact that snakes were around in day to day life impacted a broad range of behaviors and practices: from the ancient Egyptians' thoughts to minor things, such as how they placed their feet when walking. The people of this time, ranging from the Predynastic Period of 6000 B.C.E to the Ptolemaic Period that ended the rule of Egyptian pharaohs, were likely confused by their contradictory thoughts; they feared the deadly bites but were also in awe of the close holy relationship between Pharaohs and snakes.

This thesis focuses on two extremely different snakes, both deadly to humans and found commonly in the most populated areas of Egypt. Fear and veneration has always been found around creatures that humans do not know how to control, and the extra layers of religion and the close ties between Pharaohs and snakes as their protectors adds to the unease. Snakes were both feared and venerated due to the power they hold over humans; they are physically powerful and can kill humans, but they also have religious and mythological power that is just as potent. This duality of emotions in relation to snakes in ancient Egypt led to worship for not only the goddesses of protection that embodied them, but also led to the 'evil' snake counterparts having the same level of symbolism and worship.

There also is a physical quality to the interest, coming from the intrinsic beauty and unique look of each of these snakes that manifests itself in the way they move, facial features, color and fighting stance.

The inclusion of these two specific species' in this thesis serves to satisfy different sets of information. One is important in a mythological way, having taken on such a large ritualistic role, while the other is not as commonly depicted and is seen academically in the writings attached to artwork, such as inscriptions and hieroglyphics. They are both important to ancient Egyptian imagery because they are the only two types of snakes depicted in this time period that can be visually recognized from their unique physical features and traits.

## **2. Modern Phobia of Snakes**

Fear of snakes is still a far-reaching phobia today, known in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* as an 'Other Animal Type Phobia'.<sup>2</sup> Called Ophidiophobia, it affects sixty-four percent of American adults and is one of the most common phobias in the world. Although many are not diagnosed with the phobia, there are high numbers of people affected by fear on a lesser level, still becoming a detrimental part of day to day life; this blurred line between phobia and fear skews the percentage shown in the DSM and makes it hard for psychologists to know the actual percentages of affected peoples. Christopher Marley is a photographer who has spent his life capturing images of dangerous animals in close proximity. In his book, *Biophilia*, he addresses the turmoil of being afraid of snakes, while also being awe-struck by their physical elegance, with his words running parallel to ancient Egyptian thoughts on this matter. "I have to concede that I am bewildered by those who can find no beauty in reptiles. I understand there are phobias, and I admit that a healthy fear of something that can kill you is reasonable. They are an artist's ultimate medium, able to convey any feeling through pure form. Perhaps this is why snakes are silent; vocal communication is redundant in an organism that can express all through an unlimited variety of body language."<sup>3</sup>

## **3. Artist Ownership of Ancient Egyptian Serpents**

Historically, art has been used by people to comprehend how they feel about something. Working with an object or idea, an artist is able to lay claim to the essence of that thing, and that claiming takes away the unknown, fear-evoking sense that humans cannot control everything around them. Art was essentially created as a way to develop an ownership of things that scare people, which helps explain why snake imagery is so pervasive in ancient Egyptian art. Ancient Egyptian individuals and artists had a very similar thought process to that of the modern artist; specifically delving into the things Egyptian artists depicted and created, snakes are an important feature in Egyptian art because the people were trying to understand how they felt about them. These snakes were an important religious symbol, quickly becoming associated with morals and how humans should act as well as representatives of specific rulers and their godly power, as seen in the close connection between both King Tutankhamun and Cleopatra with snake imagery. The way ancient Egyptians interacted with the two species most seen in their art, the Horned Viper (Fig. 1) and the Egyptian Cobra (Fig. 2), presents us with two polar opposites.



Figure 1 - Saharan Horned Viper

<https://www.cbsnews.com/pictures/snake-15-deadliest-serpents/6/>



Figure 2 - Egyptian Cobra

[https://l.dailymail.co.uk/i/pix/2011/03/27/article-1370494-0B5CCF6C00000578-373\\_468x317.jpg](https://l.dailymail.co.uk/i/pix/2011/03/27/article-1370494-0B5CCF6C00000578-373_468x317.jpg)

These contradictory feelings are shown in ancient Egyptian times through the physical depiction of snakes in art, with their forms included in many artworks and thus leaving historians today with the ability to view the non-verbal discussion of fear and awe between the people and snakes thus immortalized. While looking at the emotional reasons behind depictions of serpents in ancient Egypt is important, general snake imagery in their art is representative of several things. The snakes showed the differences in social classes as they are commonly seen as protectors and enemies of the royal bloodline. Serpents, and the general term, were affiliated with royalty of Egypt as a whole, while separate rulers, such as Cleopatra, were depicted in very specifically stylized ways with different colors and posture given to different rulers and gods. In the general public, snakes were dangerous creatures they came in contact with regularly, but they had an air of veneration around them; snakes were the creatures that plagued their lives while also taking on godly qualities that added another barrier between classes. Apep and Wadjet, the god and goddess who take on serpent forms, are a very well known myth that were created to keep the lower classes from rising against the ruling classes and to suppress rebellion.

While not technically considered “Functional art”, the art of ancient Egyptians was meant and created for a specific purpose; the art in this thesis is generally categorized as “Ritual Art”. Or as Egyptologist Gay Robins put it: “All Egyptian art served a practical purpose: a statue held the spirit of the god or the deceased;... charms and amulets protected one from harm.” Robins continues saying that ““Art for art’s sake” was unknown and would have probably been incomprehensible to an ancient Egyptian who understood art as functional above all else.”<sup>4</sup>

Snake imagery, as seen in the tomb of King Tutankhamun as an amulet for his crown, is created to invoke the spirit of the snake, along with the gods that are known to take their form, such as Wadjet or Ra. The snake on King Tutankhamun’s funerary crown is the centerpiece of his tomb, crafted by his subjects out of precious metals and expensive gems as an offering to the snake goddess of Wadjet to call on her protection for the young king’s journey to the afterlife. Wadjet is shown on his crown in the common Uraeus symbol that captures her serpent body posed to strike down any foes. Egyptian imagery focuses on the head as the residual place of power, so when Wadjet became the patron and protector of royalty and the god Ra, she was placed upon their head in paintings and statues before Egyptians then crafted crown ornaments to continue this practice in everyday ruling.

This Uraeus of Wadjet is typical funerary imagery that is uncovered in tombs during all different periods of ancient Egypt and is also shown in a fresco tomb painting found in the Tomb of Ramesses I. It shows a snake goddess watching over a Pharaoh on his way into the afterlife, with Wadjet forming a physical barrier around the fallen ruler, who is

painted in the likeness of Ra the most powerful Egyptian deity. Through the entirety of ancient Egypt, snake imagery was used as an invocation of protection from the deities who were religiously shown in a serpent body. Serpents are seen this way until the fall of Egypt, when leadership changed from Egyptian to Ptolemaic and the Greek's brought their own snake imagery of health and good fortune in relation to the physical body and thus became inclusive to people outside of solely the ruling class. This imagery of ancient Egypt is meant to gain back some of the control that humans of ancient Egyptian time lacked and to quell the strong fear of what they did not understand but knew could harm them.

#### **4. Egyptian Cobra**

The most familiar snake in Ancient Egypt, and still widely inhabiting the area today, is the Egyptian Cobra (Fig. 2). These cobras are frequently found near water sources, so they interacted with a large segment of the population as, like any ancient civilization that thrived, the Egyptians had built their civilizations along an abundant water source: the Nile. Cobras dislike of open spaces, along with the abundance of grain storage, meant they were often hidden in sheds where they were keeping the population of rats down, which was helpful but at the same time terrifying to people just by their presence in the bustling areas.

With a large head and wide eyes that hold huge pupils, the cobra is physically similar to the snakes found in the pet trade today; they are popular because of the approachability and "innocence" found in the puppy-like features they showcase. The body is long, with a natural flow and no shape changes from the body to the tail, like some other species that are rounder in the stomach with thin tails. They have a very mild appearance and move slowly, but grow to massive sizes and usually maturing at six feet. It is not uncommon for them to hit their maximum sizes of nine feet long. The most prominent feature of the Egyptian cobra is the long cervical rib cage along the neck that flexes out into a hood when provoked. With the flared hood not usually visible, they are easy to overlook, sporting muted colors that vary between natural and earthy tones. The colors range from dark blacks and greys to light tans, with juvenile scales spotted a light yellow that disappear as they grow, but they are typically categorized as a mottled brown with a "teardrop" marking below their eyes. Their unique look makes them easily distinguished in the artwork that portrays their specific species of snake.

#### **5. Mythology of the Egyptian Cobra**

As one of the two protective goddesses of the kings, Wadjet is shrouded in mythology and stories. Her origins trace back to a story depicting her as a nurse to the infant god, Horus. Horus' uncle, Seth or Set, was treacherous and wanted to kill him and claim the throne for himself. Wadjet helped Isis, Horus' mother, protect him by hiding him in the Delta swamps of lower Egypt, cementing her place beside the throne as a protector for the rest of history.<sup>5</sup> She is shown as a rearing cobra to symbolize her willingness to strike down the betrayers of the throne in the beginning of her myth, she was thought to be able to poison people with venom, taking on the aspects of the snake she was visualized as, but she quickly became a deity of heat and fire as well. This upgrade in her powers was a way for the royalty to scare their followers, calling upon the Lady of the House of Flame as their right hand.

As seen in the story of the Netby, ancient Egypt thrived on the ideas of binaries. Imagery revolves around dual ideas, such as their landscape, with the Nile becoming a symbol of fertility and the desert of barrenness. It shows in other examples as well; their daily experience of Day as successful and the Night as unknown and a time of rest, and even to the basic structure of the land and kingdom with a cultural and physical divide between Lower and Upper Egypt. This especially shows in the religion, with two gods pitted against each other that are so similar but stand for good versus evil. In the case of Wadjet the protector, there was Apep, her feared companion; where Wadjet stood beside royalty in her glorious cobra form, Apep was below, constantly betraying and vilifying himself in the eyes of the public. Though he has never been narrowed down into a single subspecies of snake, he is depicted in coloration and fighting style that is similar to the Viper. There are many works of art from ancient Egyptian time that feature a viper to offset the cobra, showing him as a cunning enemy to the gods. Evidence of this binary relationship will be discussed in the upcoming sections.

## 6. Tutankhamun's Funerary Mask

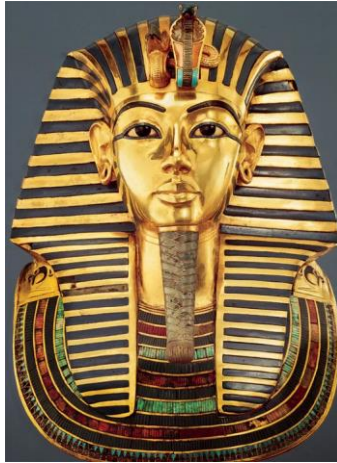


Figure 3 - King Tutankhamun's Mask

[https://media.vanityfair.com/photos/54285d9306f239114757b50b/master/w\\_600,h\\_720,c\\_limit/image.jpg](https://media.vanityfair.com/photos/54285d9306f239114757b50b/master/w_600,h_720,c_limit/image.jpg)

The burial tomb of Tutankhamun is an important piece of art history for the Ancient Egyptians. The importance of the tomb is not a single piece of art, but the glimpse into history that historians, and the general public, have been given by the excavation. It was uncovered in 1922, which was early on in the excavation of ancient Egyptian artifacts, and the historical significance of the tomb has brought popularity to the minor figure that the adolescent king did not have before that.

Tutankhamun ruled from the age of eight to eighteen, when he died a young death. His tomb was constructed in Thebes, Egypt during the 18th dynasty, ca. 1323 BCE. The opulent treasures of his tomb are what brought him to fame in the world, as it had stayed untouched and avoided looting until its excavation. The inside of his tomb gives us an idea of the wealth of his kingdom, not just through the materials used, but also through the artistic quality and talent present.<sup>6</sup>

The focus of his tomb was the mummified body, enshrined in three different coffins. His body was housed in the most beautiful coffin, the innermost of the three, which was crafted of gold and inlaid with semi-precious stones, following the Egyptian custom of royal burial tombs. The innermost coffin is the one that is seen on display at the Egyptian Museum in Cairo and also in many of the shows it travels in.

The piece that showcases the Egyptian Cobra is the funerary mask (Fig. 3) that was laid atop Tutankhamun's inner coffin. There are a lot of materials used, with the most prevalent ones being lapis lazuli, inlaid into the beard to create a plaited effect and also to outline the eyes and eyebrows, quartz for the eyes, and obsidian for the pupils. Carnelian, feldspar, turquoise, amazonite, faience, and glass inlays make up the broad collar. Because of the heavy excess of materials used, the mask weighs twenty-two pounds, measuring 1' 9 1/4" high.

The two crown ornaments are Wadjet as a cobra and Nekhbet as a vulture, which symbolizes Tutankhamun's rule of the Lower and Upper Egypt, respectively, of whom each woman is a protector goddess. The mask is the most symbolic part of the entire burial chamber, crafted to look opulent and expensive, while resting on a mummification casket of only gold without any added flares of stones or metals. The snake is rearing off the headdress as the most symbolic feature of his tomb, symbolizing Wadjet and her willingness to strike even in death to protect the Pharaoh. King Tut is not known to have any relationship with snakes or serpents besides the ruling class and their patron goddess of Wadjet, so academics have not spoken of other reasons that snakes would be seen in the king's tomb. "The goddess Wadjet appears in the form of the living Uraeus to anoint your head with her flames. She rises up on the left side of your head and she shines from the right side of your temples without speech; she rises up on your head during each and every hour of the day, even as she does for her father Ra, and through her the terror which you inspire in the spirits is increased... she will never leave you, are of you strikes into the souls which are made perfect."<sup>7</sup> This quote, translated from the *Book of the Dead*, shows the importance of Wadjet's placement in ancient Egyptian imagery.

The body language of the serpent on the crown is called the Uraeus, visualized as an upright, attacking female cobra, was the symbol of the Egyptian goddess Wadjet, who was seen commonly in this form. The Uraeus got its name from

the connection to Wadjet, and it became its own symbol, quickly turning into a powerful image of protection that was continuously used in the art that followed. In all of the history of ancient Egypt, the Uraeus is one of two symbols ever used on a pharaoh's official headdress, found alongside the vulture. The two forms, the cobra symbolizing Wadjet, and the vulture as her sister, Nekhbet, were known as the Netby, which translates to "Two Ladies". There are many stories that weave through time connecting the Netby and the Pharaohs of Egypt, showing the two women protecting and aiding the rulers in difficult times. As stated in the above sections, the exclusivity of crown ornament imagery is important in the way that only two animals were historically seen placed there. Crown ornaments were created as a way of invoking the spirit of Netby, which led rulers to wear their images on their crowns and headdresses at all times.

The flared hood of the cobra ornament is mirrored in the masks' extra fabric that is shown. Another technique used to create parallels and create a cohesive visual are the horizontal grooves that follow both the cobra's belly but also the flared fabric shown along the sides of the mask and fall down over the shoulders. Using the same materials and widths of the lines adds to the cohesion. The inscriptions along the shoulders of the mask are said to be an ancient protection spell from the Book of the Dead, written in Egyptian hieroglyphs on the back and shoulders in ten vertical and two horizontal lines. The importance of this spell is tied to the features of the young king's face; he was preserved in the likeness of Osiris, which was a common burial tradition to pay homage to the god of the afterlife and secure the royal family a place beside the gods in death.<sup>8</sup> The adolescent king is depicted with a stoic expression that is seen multiple times throughout the treasures and the paintings in his tomb. This portrayal of a young king in royal regalia, which includes a nemes headdress and a false beard,<sup>9</sup> signifies the pride of his kingdom and the respect for the leader they lost.

## 7. Golden Uraeus of Senusret II



Figure 4 - Golden Uraeus of Senusret II Year: ca. 1897-1878 B.C.E

Medium: gold and semiprecious stones

<https://www.touregypt.net/images/touregypt/snake6.jpg>

One of the most popular works of art from ancient Egypt that features an Egyptian Cobra is the Golden Uraeus of Senusret II (Fig. 4), currently on display in the Cairo Museum. Discovered in 1919, it was unearthed during a full excavation of the Pyramid of Senusret II that is located in the village of El Lahun, in Faiyum, Egypt.<sup>10</sup> The crown ornament dates back to the Pharaoh's rule of the twelfth dynasty of Egypt, between the years of 1897 and 1878 BCE, and is assumed to be a piece of the burial loot that had been laid to rest with the ruler. The finding of a crown ornament in a burial tomb is rare, only happening once more with Tutankhamun's tomb in 1922, as they are thought to be passed down to the next in line for the throne.<sup>11</sup>

The ornament is solid gold, measuring two inches and six centimeters long and heavily weighted with semiprecious stones. The head is fashioned in the shape of a cobra's, handled by someone who had to be familiar with the specific species of the snake. The round, wide head is Lapis Lazuli, flat along the top with large eyes of black garnet placed on either side of the lengthy nose. The Lapis Lazuli is a special stone, one that was used by royalty of the time period for makeup to symbolize status, which inflated the price and created accessibility difficulties. There are grooves carved into the gold, along the belly of the snake, in horizontal rows that extend down to the tail. Inlays of Carnelian and turquoise run down the side of the grooves, following the curve of the body and shaping the important cervical rib of



the “flared hood” that is seen on an attacking cobra. The proportions of the head to the rest of the body are inconsistent with the actual proportions of the common cobra; the artist was using a technique to create depth as the viewer would likely see the ornament from a distance. The important part of the piece is the head and hood of the snake, so the creative liberty taken was to ensure that the focus of the work was at the forefront, in a literal sense. The texture of the stone and gold had initially been smooth, polished to show off the gleaming stones. It was found in the excavation, buried in about six inches of loose debris that had been washed around by a flood of the burial chamber. This harsh history of the elements has created a texture along the outside of the ornament that exemplifies those details, but the core of the piece remains intact. At the base of the tail are two loops that would have secured the Pharaoh's headdress, providing a point of attachment for the heavy object.

The colors of the ornament are commonly seen in Egyptian art. The brightness of the Lapis Lazuli and Carnelian, along with the shining gold, are from a color palette that sculptors would use to pay homage to the status of the wearer. As stated previously, Lapis Lazuli is thought to have only been used by royal families in their makeup and dress, being exclusively gifted to them by other rulers, family members and subjects due to the stones divine association.<sup>12</sup>

## 8. Statue of Cleopatra VII Philopator



Figure 5 - Statue of Cleopatra VII Philopator, Year: ca. 51-30 B.C.E

Medium: Basalt

<https://www.gettyimages.com/detail/photo/cleopatra-vii-with-cornucopia-basalt-statue-high-res-stock-photography/185738076>

This statue of Cleopatra (Fig. 5) is important for two reasons, with the crown ornament and the mythological ties that place the snake there. The snake is not placed for the same reason that King Tutankhamun's crown was, but for the actual ruler's tie to snakes that had nothing to do with Wadjet's protection.

There is a story that is widely spread from a later date in the Ptolemaic Era after Cleopatra's death in 30 BC and the information about this ruler's death comes from primary source accounts of Roman historians who were keeping written documentation about the war efforts of the Roman Republic's army. It details her death as a suicide by snake bite, and forever connects her life and mythology to that of the cobra, also known in the story as an asp. The term *asp* is a vague term that is occasionally used interchangeably in ancient mythology and lore to describe some type of snake. In the case of Cleopatra, the word asp is an umbrella term to describe a snake, then seen as a “water snake”, that frequented the Nile, which is something the Cobra was known for.

The cobra's venom is a large part of this tale, a venom that is a mix of neurotoxins and cytotoxins that affects the nervous system, stopping nerve signals from being transmitted to the muscles of the body, and then causing failure in the lungs and heart, quickly inducing the latest stages of respiratory failure.

When Antony was killed during a takeover of Ptolemaic Egypt, Cleopatra and their children were locked in rooms by the leader of the overthrowing army until they could be sent to Rome where the rulers would decide their fate. Instead of going willingly, Cleopatra had a basket of figs snuck into her room by servants who she trusted, instructing them to smuggle a cobra into her room wrapped in the thick branches and fig leaves. The Cobra's bite was something she went to willingly after the death of her partner and the bleak future ahead of her, portrayed in art to hold it to her breast and let it bite her there. Though science today would say she did not actually have a snake bite her, but rather

pierced herself with a hairpin dipped in venom or something of the like, the account dates back to her overseeing doctor of the time and historians agree that a type of venom, self-inflicted, was the cause of her death. This struggle for freedom and the weight of a life or death situation is the symbolic theme of the story as it is still told to this day. Knowing what she would go through during the victory march through Rome, Cleopatra would rather die than subject herself to becoming a glorified war prize. Her subsequent depictions throughout history reflected this defiant feminist moment, with earlier works portraying her in a derogatory and misogynistic way, but ultimately becoming a symbol of inner strength.

When depicted in art since then, the asp, always looks small and dainty in her hand, with small droplets of blood sometimes visible. These depictions are visible in Guido Reni's *Cleopatra* (Fig. 6), showing a woman in pain with her eyes rolling back in her head, holding a tiny cobra that could be no more than four inches long and too skinny to be correct portions for a snake. A cobra averages six feet long and this ordeal, while shown in art history as a solemn and quiet event, would have been gruesome and painful; wrestling the snake and leading to a venom induced respiratory failure would not be as easy as the depictions would have one think. The hand the cobra had in bringing about her death casts a fearful and negative shadow, but there is also the idea that the snake was in a way bringing her freedom and protection by stopping herself from being paraded around Rome by the men who sought to control her. Both of these aspects, the fear and the awe, add another layer to the contradiction that people have about this snake.



Figure 6 - Guido reni "Cleopatra", Year: ca. 1640 A.D.

Medium: Oil on canvas

[https://thumb101.shutterstock.com/display\\_pic\\_with\\_logo/2713483/231655957/stock-photo-reni-guido-cleopatra-with-the-asp-baroque-art-oil-on-canvas-331655957.jpg](https://thumb101.shutterstock.com/display_pic_with_logo/2713483/231655957/stock-photo-reni-guido-cleopatra-with-the-asp-baroque-art-oil-on-canvas-331655957.jpg)

The medium for this statue is Basalt, a type of volcanic rock formed when lava rapidly cools, leading to the deep dark black of the stone. This secular art piece, most likely commissioned by Cleopatra during her reign, is a type of propaganda that rulers of ancient Egypt were known to implement. The vagueness of her features is common when it comes to propaganda art of the near Middle East, Egypt and Africa; the rulers are depicted in the same way deities would be, with a basic structure and face that allows viewers to worship the essence of the ruler instead of the face of the ruler. The suspected creation of the piece was anywhere from 51 to 30 BC.

## 9. Saharan Horned Viper

The Saharan Horned Viper (Fig. 1), scientifically known as "Cerastes Cerastes" and also the Horned Desert Viper, is found in the dry, sandy areas of Egypt. They can be identified by a pair of supraocular "horns", one over each eye; eyes that are prominent and striking, set on the sides of the head. They are smaller than the cobra, coming to age around one to two feet on average, with a stout, muscular body that thins to a long point at the tail. Their colors are camouflage and match the environment of the desert; they can be yellow, pale grey, a light pink, red or pale brown that vary geographically to perfectly match the substrate color. Dark blotches run down the body, shaped in semi rectangles that commonly fuse into crossbars along their back and reach around before coming to an end along the sides of their pale white belly.

There is a possible physical reason for why cobras are seen as representing good and vipers are seen as representing evil and it all has to do with the way people would have interacted with the two snakes in their daily lives. When



threatened, cobras will rear back into the air and flail their hoods, swaying back and forth in a hypnotic dance before darting either to attack or retreat. It is seen as regal and elegant, much the way the Uraeus has been portrayed. Egypt was also the home of the beginning stages of Snake Charming, which could have added to the control humans felt they had specifically over cobras and took away some of the fear that comes from the unknown. The viper presents physically different when threatened, pressing their bodies into the sand and assuming a C-shaped coil before attacking from the ground underfoot. They are seen as scheming because they attack without being seen, usually surrounded by a rasping noise from running their tail coils together. Their attack inspires panic and pain upon the first bite while cobras inspire awe and fear in the way they hold themselves. Saharan Horned Vipers are ambush predators, laying in wait and, once latched onto their victim, they don't let go until their venom takes effect and their prey is dead. They are unique in this bite and hold strategy because most other vipers bite their prey to inject venom and then let their prey go, following scent trails until they come across the dead prey and reducing the risk of dangerous retaliation during the bite and hold process. Their venom is deadly, like the cobras, but fast acting in a different way, causing immediate swelling, nausea, violent vomiting, haemorrhage, haematuria, necrosis and may also cause cardiotoxicity and myotoxicity if their victim lives long enough to experience either of those symptoms.<sup>13</sup>

## 10. Venom-Induced Mythology

The reality of a violent death due to their bite is part of the dread shrouding serpents, however, another is the mythological aspect of gods and goddesses who take the form of snakes. "Though snakes could turn their powers to protect kings and queens, serpents also threatened the sun god Re on his journey through the next world. Egyptian religion made room for both the positive and negative aspects of certain animals."<sup>14</sup> In the *Book of Coming Forth by Day*, also widely known as the *Book of the Dead*, one can see the confusion present in how ancient Egyptians articulated their feelings towards serpents.<sup>15</sup> This is an important book to reference, as it is an ancient funerary text that was buried in ancient Egyptian tombs regularly and holds relevant information regarding cultural superstitions and ritualistic information that date back to 1550 BCE when it was originally transcribed.<sup>16</sup> There are a few spells outlined in the book that showed a positive light, like the one called "For Being Transformed into a Snake"; this shows an envy about the prowess of snakes and the need to take control of those aspects. There were also spells with a negative connotation, labeled "Passing by the dangerous coils of Apep"... "For not being bitten by a snake in the realm of the dead" was another spell to help the general public avoid serpents in the afterlife, where they can be a help or a hindrance.<sup>17</sup>

## 11. Is Apep a Viper?

As stated previously, Apep, the opposing god to Wadjet, was also seen as a serpent; yet where Wadjet was very distinctly shown as a cobra, Apep is depicted in a different way. In some stories, especially ones involving gods and goddesses with negative connotations, the god and their otherworldly animal form is described in a vague fashion, leaving the public to make assumptions about the unknown creature, which added to the fear-level and thus also made it much easier for Pharaoh's to rule without question. To question the Pharaoh meant to question the gods and goddesses tasked with protecting them, which would have been inconceivable, and having a serpent like Apep, where people were able to create this mythical and scary story about his features, just cemented the pharaoh's rule more. Leaving humans open to interpret Apep without set parameters, lead to him being described as a large and fearsome serpent-like creature. It is hard to label Apep without having a physical description and evokes a fear that humans are constantly fighting by putting labels on things, so without a label, Apep was even more frightening to the people of ancient Egypt.

Although ancient Egyptians had no insight into Apep's physical appearance beyond a basic snake description, that did not stop their ability to add him into the art and mythology of the time. In many images, Apep is seen coiled into the ground, hidden in corners or under the feet of gods and pharaohs. The physical form he takes showcases common viper behavior, the same way Wadjet depicts cobra body language when provoked; a c-shaped coil, bodies pressed into the sand, and subsequently attacking an unsuspecting victim from below. Though no publications have been found by the author that consider the significance of these physical overlaps, there is archaeological evidence found in unearthed art that shows this theory has possible merit.

## 12. Fresco from the Tomb of Ramesses I

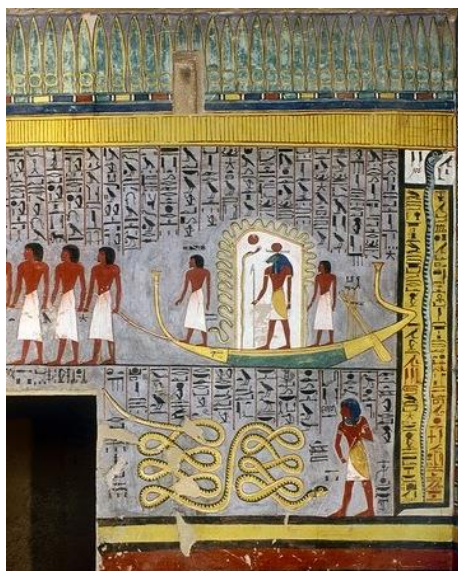


Figure 7 - Fresco from Tomb of Ramesses I, Year: ca. 1290 B.C.E

Medium: Plaster

[http://realpyramidtexts.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Book\\_of\\_Gates\\_3rd\\_Hour.jpg](http://realpyramidtexts.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Book_of_Gates_3rd_Hour.jpg)

A comparison of the representation of Apep and Wadjet in their respective roles of good versus evil, as seen in a fresco from the Tomb of Ramesses I (Fig. 7), can be helpful in understanding the use of these specific snake species in art

Ramesses I was a Pharaoh around 1290 BC who had a short rule and an even shorter list of accomplishments; he was consequently buried in a smaller than average tomb and hastily finished tomb. The tomb was discovered in 1817 by Giovanni Belzoni and is described as a single corridor and one small room.<sup>18</sup> There are a multitude of reasons that historians believe his tomb was quickly built and possibly even unfinished, with walls that were haphazardly laid and then covered in an uneven layer of plaster upon which the usual frescos were painted. Even his sarcophagus shows signs of not being properly treated, with inscriptions painted on instead of carved, which led to an unusual amount of errors.<sup>19</sup>

Funerary temples were decorated with pictorial reliefs as a way of providing comfort for the *ka*, as they will be resting in the tomb for the rest of eternity. It was something that cost a lot of money and was almost exclusively for the wealthy, as most art of ancient Egyptian time was. Typically the images were religious and carried ritual symbolism, but there were usually smaller pictures that showed the deceased in situations that they enjoyed during life as a way of celebrating moments that will no longer be possible for souls to partake in. There is a large amount of information for art historians and archaeologists in these reliefs, and these tomb discoveries have led to the understanding that modern people have about the culture.<sup>20</sup>

The frescos show the Pharaoh in typical religious and ritual scenes, surrounded by the gods and being welcomed into the eternal afterlife with them. Animal imagery is common in these types of artwork, especially when it comes to images of the gods as they are regularly depicted as creatures instead of humans. The fresco showing Apep and Wadjet in their serpent form is painted around the god Ra as he travels through the world of the dead. Ramesses is not thought to be visible in this piece, or at least not in the part of the fresco that has actually survived the years as there are many pieces that, like the bottom left corner, are lost to the elements.

Ra is on a boat surrounded by servants who attend him on his journey; we know it is him based on the staff in his hand, the sun on his headdress, his shapeshifted appearance, and in the jewelry he wears. In the image, Ra is depicted as larger than the servants around him and that adds to our knowledge that he is a god and the men around him are not; this is called hierarchical scale and the relative height of the figures determines the importance in relation to each other.

Surrounding Ra is the physical form of Wadjet and her protection of the gods and Pharaohs. The snake figure forms a rectangular doorway-like shape that encircles his entire body, and alludes to being Wadjet by encompassing her protective nature and symbolism.

The cobra, and Wadjet as she is symbolically represented by the uraeus, were seen as protectors of the living and, more specifically, the ruling pharaohs. They were not typically seen in reference to death besides guarding the departed on their way to the afterlife and in significant funerary wear like masks. Her main role when seen in images that reside in tombs and death scenes is as a protector for those of power that travel into the underworld, keeping them encased in safety, as shown physically here, and guiding them through their last and most difficult struggle as living beings. Vipers, and Apep as archaeological evidence proves, is more active in death and afterlife imagery based on his constant mythological attacks against the sun god, Ra, who is the leader of all the gods in ancient Egyptian culture.

A large part of Apep's entire mythology is his struggle to keep Ra, and Ra's bloodline that is thought to be passed down through the blood of the ruling class, from reaching their final afterlife. He is shown in serpent form in the bottom half of the image, coiled in the way a viper does before attacking. He is in battle with a faceless man who wears a cloak and jewelry that speaks to his status and closely resembling Ra's attire. There is a common theme surrounding Apep and his imagery that explains why he is regularly shown in a fight or already slayed; ancient Egyptians believed that images of the afterworld and images in a tomb are sacred, playing a major role in the life after death of the deceased. Apep, being the greatest enemy of Ra, is always shown next to a being that will be able to kill him and destroy him, and it is not uncommon to see him with weapons already lodged into his figure, like arrows and swords that pierce his flesh. This symbolism is important as it shows Egyptian's fear of negativity and evil, leading to imagery that shows a constant triumph of Ra over Apep. He is the deification of darkness and chaos, wreaking so much havoc in mythology that priests of ancient Egypt had a book whose title translated to *Books of Overthrowing Apep*.

Apep's form in this speaks to the theory of body language playing a large role in the depiction of snakes as gods; where Apep is easily distinguished by his coiled shape and lowered head, Wadjet head still is shown curled up in the upright Uraeus position she is known for. The cunning, conniving, evil connotation of Apep is shown visibly here due to the cowardly and underhanded attack style that the viper presents itself in.

While looking at the emotional reasons behind depictions of serpents in ancient Egypt is important, general snake imagery in their art is representative of several things. The snakes showed the differences in social classes as they are commonly seen as protectors and enemies of the royal bloodline. Serpents, and the general term, were affiliated with royalty of Egypt as a whole, while separate rulers, such as Cleopatra, were depicted in very specifically stylized ways with different colors and posture given to different rulers and gods. In the general public, snakes were dangerous creatures they came in contact with regularly, but they had an air of veneration around them; snakes were the creatures that plagued their lives while also taking on godly qualities that added another barrier between classes. Apep and Wadjet, the god and goddess who take on serpent forms, are a very well known myth that were created to keep the lower classes from rising against the ruling classes and to suppress rebellion.

### 13. The Met's Viper Bracelet



Figure 8 - Snake Bracelet, Year: A.D. 1st Century

Medium: Gold

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/547710>

There does not appear to be extensive research so far about Apep's imagery as a viper or the Viper's role in the mythology and art of ancient Egypt. Most of the images showing Apep as a viper are very subtle, usually showing him as a coiled serpent instead of the rearing Uraeus that is typically seen; which aligns with the fact that vipers coil

themselves into the sand and hide when they are threatened or preparing to attack. In hieroglyphics, vipers can be identified immediately by the subocular horns that are attached to the snake symbol.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art has a piece of jewelry that is so blatantly a viper, that even someone without previous herpetology knowledge would be able to recognize it. This bracelet (Fig. 8) is from the Ptolemaic period, a period of time where a Greek family took control and ruled Egypt for three centuries until the Roman Empire conquered Egypt and took the rule from Cleopatra VII, who is still a familiar ruling face of Egypt. The Ptolemy's never fully immersed themselves into Egyptian culture, preferring to coexist with their people while staying Greek at their roots. This cultural difference in the ruling family influenced many aspects of Egyptian's daily lives, including the artwork from the time period.

"Snake jewelry was not limited to Egypt in the Ptolemaic and Roman Periods, and, in fact, was not a traditional Egyptian sort of jewelry before the Ptolemaic period."<sup>21</sup> This quote from the Metropolitan's description of the bracelet further supports the fact that snakes were typically seen only on rulers headwear and royal outfits. In Egyptian culture, serpents held royal and mythological significance while snakes in Greek culture were seen as a healing symbol, which made it more accessible to their people and shows that this bracelet was more inclusive and could have been owned by someone outside of the ruling class. Snakes in greek mythology had a similar dual mythological role, with ties to both the underworld and death but also health and protection of the physical body. Where Greeks focused on the positives of protecting everyone and not just the ruling class, Egyptians saw snakes as protectors of royalty. Snakes in Greek art were inclusive and thought to be a powerful omen of health for any person to invoke, whereas Egyptian art is centered around the upper caste of royal blood and completely excludes the middle and lower castes.

This bracelet is thought to be from Lower Egypt, crafted during the 1st century AD, and was gifted to the museum in 1918 by the Rogers Fund after being purchased in Cairo earlier that year.<sup>22</sup>

This bracelet is fashioned in solid gold, which is the typical material seen in Egyptian artifacts and jewelry. Unlike with Tutenkhamun's Funerary Mask and the Golden Uraeus of Senusret, there is a lack of jewels and semi-precious stones, which adds to the theory that this could have been owned by someone in a class outside of the royal family. With it's flattened ovular head and subocular horns etched into the gold, there is no doubt that this snake was crafted to look like a viper. The bracelet is crafted in a familiar Egyptian style, with bands that are made to wrap around the wrist, arm or ankle, and at either end is a snake. The one with the horns is larger, with the focus on the head and horns, while the other snake is seen in a wave shape that mimics the coiled shape of a viper as seen from above. There is no real way to further tell the snake species besides the head, as there is not any real scale or color detail besides basic etching to show a very vague overlap of where scales should be.

Some of the questions raised by the analysis of these different art objects are: Why has no one looked at the specific type of snake depicted in ancient Egyptian serpent imagery? It appears that most people do not seem to understand that every snake is not the cobra and that has made these theories so interesting; we have been uncovering ancient Egyptian artifacts for the last hundred years and snakes are a common secondary character in the narratives of the art, so this imagery should have been part of in-depth academic research for a while. Could it be that people are still so scared of the negative connotations that have followed snakes for centuries that they don't want to look closer? Why are we just now realizing that there are only two snake species being depicted? As described above in relation to Apep and his possible viper imagery, leaving his image up to interpretation let people's fears lead them and the thought of this physically vague serpent became a very personalized fear.

## 14. Magical Stela (Cippus of Horus)



Figure 9 - Magical Stela, Year: 360-343 B.C.

Medium: Meta-Greywacke

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/546037>

The Metropolitan Museum of Art has another artifact that furthers the theories explored in this thesis; the Magical Stela of Horus (Fig. 9) is an interesting artifact that references serpents as it does not actually depict images of snakes. It is part of the MET's collection and was gifted to the museum as part of the Fletcher Fund in 1950, and is originally thought to be from either Alexandria or Heliopolis, Egypt. It is from the Late Period of Egypt, sometime between 360-343 B.C., with a height of 38.5 cm and a width of 33.5 cm. The medium of this Stela is meta-greywacke, which is a type of sandstone that is earthy and grey, characterized by how hard it is and the unique dark color and grainy fragments it is made up of. Minerals like quartz, feldspar, calcite, iron oxides, tourmaline, epidote, and other hard stones are found in the grain of the stone.<sup>23</sup> Stelae are slabs of stone, usually sandstone or limestone, that can be crafted for religious uses, tombstones, and markers for various other reasons.

This stela is part of a group known as the "Cippus of Horus", a collection of stela referencing ancient medicine and magical cures that focused on animal attacks against the body. This stele is one of the best preserved steles that are known today, with only a few small chips in it. It was created as a commission for the priest Esatum after he traveled to the city of Heliopolis and came across inscriptions that he found interesting, which he copied and had put onto a stela. When Alexander the Great built the capital of Alexandria, he had it moved to the city and it has since passed from the Chancellor of Austria into private family collections before coming to the Metropolitan Museum.

Inscriptions cover most of the stela, and the five lines in the center are written from Isis' point of view and referencing a story from ancient Egyptian Mythology: "while she [Isis] and Horus were still hiding in the marshes, the child became ill. In her despair, she cried for help to the "Boat of Eternity" (the sun boat in which the god travels over the sky), "and the sun disk stopped opposite her and did not move from his place."<sup>24</sup> Thoth was sent from the sunboat to help Isis and cured Horus by reciting a catalogue of spells. The following hieroglyphics, along the base, describe the spells that were used in the story and how they cured Horus.

Along with the inscriptions and spells, there is a carved relief that shows Horus as a three-dimensional statue, walking out of the stela towards the viewer with snakes, scroptions, an antelope and a lion in his hand that symbolize his mythical status and powers. The figure is portrayed in a typical way for the time period, showing Horus young, nude and positioned in an unnaturally stoic way. On either side of Horus are Thoth and Isis, both standing on coiled serpents with subocular horns visible, showing that these are vipers that are depicted.

The spells speak of how to heal poison and venomous snake bites. Ancient doctors would pour blessed water onto the stela and then have their poisoned patient drink it in the hopes that they would be cured the same way Horus was. This stela references quite a few different animals, but focuses mainly on venomous snakes and cats.

While the snake imagery is a secondary aspect of this stele, the importance of serpents in relation to the symbolism is great; the piece was created out of a need to protect against this creature that the people of ancient times so strongly feared.

## 15. Conclusion

The information covered in this thesis and the supporting research concludes that ancient Egyptians used two specific snakes to depict serpents in their art. There is an abundance of evidence that snakes were important secondary characters in ancient Egyptian art and there are various reasons for this. With mythological ties to religion, royalty and daily lives, people were living in close contact with these creatures that held symbolic power of the deities and therefore had to come to terms with the duality of terror and respect that they felt when interacting with the snakes around them.

With the physical markers that we can pick out of an image of a snake, the author has had the chance to research the possible ties to local herpetology and the affects specific species of snakes had on the imagery and serpent depictions of the Egyptian dynasty and then draw theories from the compiled information. There are important connections between the snakes in Egypt and the way that Egyptians portrayed them that also include the unique physical traits and body language of both species of snakes, specifically in attack poses and the daily venomous danger they represent to ancient civilians.

With an understanding of past evidence and archaeological findings, new theories were explored from the author's own compiled research, the most substantial being that Apep is a viper. These newly established theories grant even more insight into a society and culture that academics are today still excavating and are continuously seeking to understand through the art that is found.

The thought that Egyptians of ancient time took inspiration from the nature surrounding them has been a thoroughly researched possibility, but this thesis takes earlier research and develops the theory in regards to serpent depictions. A large majority of the art that has been found and dated to this civilization interpret serpents and snakes in very specific physical ways, which can be recognized as two species of snakes that can be visually recognized through the artistic depiction of physical features and traits. Through all the theories, research and discoveries, a new view of the animal imagery that ancient Egyptians consistently portrayed in their art has been uncovered and brings a new layer of understanding to ancient Egyptian culture and what was important to the people who lived then.

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