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# CHRONOLOG

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ARCHAEOLOGY, ASSYRIOLOGY, & EGYPTOLOGY



# Something Fishy: A Selection of Egyptian Fish and Artifacts

Lucian R. Andersen

In a fascinating display of continuity, a number of species of extant Egyptian fish have been identified in Ancient Egyptian sources. Deir el-Medina records of fish deliveries list various species of fish by their Egyptian names, some of which were able to be mapped to known genera of fish, such as elephantfish (*Mormyrus*), upside-down catfish (*Synodontis*), mullets (*Mugil*), and tilapia (*Oreochromis*, possibly *O. niloticus*) (Janssen 1997, 49).

These same fish have also been identified in the tomb reliefs of Ti (Saqqara, dynasty V) and Mereruka (Saqqara, dynasty VI), along with the fahaka pufferfish (*Tetraodon lineatus*) and the vundu (*Heterobranchus longifilis*) (Darby et al 1977, 360). These are only a select few species of fish, I have chosen to depict in my illustration, taking inspiration from the Ancient Egyptian material culture.

Illustration description:

- a: Upside-down catfish (*Synodontis batensoda*).
- b: Upside-down catfish amulet, after object 09.180.1182 (The Metropolitan Museum).
- c: Upside-down catfish amulet, after object 57.1072 (The Walters Art Museum). d: Nile tilapia with young (*Oreochromis niloticus*).
- e: Flathead gray mullet (*Mugil cephalus*).
- f: Figure of a tilapia, after object 48.111 (Brooklyn Museum).
- g: Tilapia-shaped cosmetic dish, after object 90.6.24 (The Metropolitan Museum).
- h: Fahaka pufferfish (*Tetraodon lineatus*). i: Fesikh, a salted fermented gray mullet.
- j: Fish amulet, after object EA30484 (The British Museum).
- k: A painting of the fahaka, after object EA37977 (The British Museum).
- l: Vundu (*Heterobranchus longifilis*).
- m: Narmer's (nꜥr-mr) anthropomorphized name, after AN1896-1908.E.3915 (The Ashmolean Museum).
- n: Elephant-snout fish (*Mormyrus kannume*).
- o: A figure of the *Oxyrhynchus* fish, inspired by the object 1987.001 (Michael C. Carlos Museum) and Paheri's inscription in the tomb of Ahmose (EK-5).

Hieroglyph colors referenced from The Polychrome Hieroglyph Research Project (Nunn 2020).

**Lucian R. Andersen (he/  
they)**

*BA student in Egyptology,  
University of Copenhagen*

**Contact**

*dvh305@alumni.ku.dk*

**Interest areas**



*linguistics, art,  
reconstructions and models,  
experimental archaeology*

A SELECTION OF  
EGYPTIAN FISH AND ARTIFACTS



## Something Fishy

### (a–c) **Upside-down catfish (*Synodontis* sp.)**

  *whꜥ.w* (TLA 48830)

As per their common name, some of the members of this genus of fish are known to swim upside down. The ancient Egyptians were aware of it, as can be seen from the depictions in the tomb of Mereruka (Brewer and Friedman 1989, 68–69). Charms shaped like the upside-down catfish were worn in the Middle Kingdom, possibly as protection from drowning (Brewer and Friedman 1989, 4). One such charm features in the Papyrus Westcar (Parkinson 1997, 110–111), resembling the upside-down catfish amulet (09.180.1182) in the Metropolitan Museum by description. It has been suggested that Ancient Egyptians connected the catfish appearing dead but clearly being alive with regeneration, and its image could have been used for the amulets for that reason (Stünkel 2015). Alternatively, it could have been shaped like the tilapia, similarly to the amulet EA30484 in The British Museum.



### (d, f, g, j) **Nile tilapia (*Oreochromis niloticus*)**

  *wꜥd* (TLA 43660),   *in.t* (TLA 26760)

Out of all the tilapia species found in Egypt, the Nile tilapia or bulti is both the most common and one of the most frequently represented in fishing scenes and artifacts from Ancient Egypt. (Brewer and Friedman 1989, 77). They tend to live and breed in shallow waters, and, as a result, would have been caught in the water basins after the seasonal Nile flood subsided, which could have led to their association with fertility and with the primeval waters of the creation myths (Brewer and Friedman, 1989, 4).

In addition, the Nile tilapia keeps its eggs in its mouth until they hatch (Brewer and Friedman, 1989: 79), which parallels the Heliopolitan creation myth (Wilkinson 2017, 17–18), making it one of the possible reasons for its popularity.

### (l, m) **Heterobranchus sp.**

  *nꜥr* (TLA 80570)

Two species of the genus, the eel-like fattyfin catfish (*H. bidorsalis*) and the vundu (*H. longifilis*) have been recorded in modern Egypt. Apart from the aforementioned tomb reliefs, this genus of catfish is the subject of one of the earliest artistic depictions of fish in Ancient Egypt, as one of the hieroglyphs used to write the earliest known Egyptian king Narmer's name on the Narmer palette and cylinder seal (Brewer and Friedman 1989, 63; Egyptian Museum in Cairo, JE 32169; Ashmolean Museum, AN1896-1908.E.3915).

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### (n, o) Elephantfish (*Mormyrus* sp.)

 *h3.t* (TLA 122210)

Recognizable by their downturned snouts, the members of this genus are easy to spot in Egyptian art, though it can be challenging to distinguish between individual species based on that alone (Brewer and Friedman, 1989: 51–52). According to the Osiris myth, it was namely one of these fish, also known by its Greek name *Oxyrhynchus*, that ate the phallus of Osiris. Plutarch and Aelian report that the fishermen of the city Oxyrhynchus (modern Al-Bahnasa), where the fish were worshipped, avoided catching them for religious reasons, which is corroborated by contemporary Egyptian sources. However, elephantfish were also depicted in the fishing scenes across all periods of Egyptian history, suggesting, though not guaranteeing, that they may have been an accepted food (Darby et al 1977, 383–389).


### (e, i) Mullet (*Mugil* sp.)

 *ʔd.w* (TLA 35540)

Three species of the *Mugil* genus (*M. cephalus*, *M. capito*, and *M. auratus*) have been identified in Egypt (Brewer and Friedman 1989, 73). Today, they are some of the most important commercial fish in modern Egypt, along with the tilapia (Brewer and Friedman 1989, 72), as well as the main ingredient of *fesikh* (فسیخ), a salted fermented mullet traditionally eaten during the spring festival of Sham el-Nessim (Darby et al 1977, 372).

It has been suggested that the festival goes back to Ancient Egyptian springtime festivals (Asante 2002, 75), and the methods used to prepare *fesikh* today are similar to the salting and drying of fish described by Herodotus (Darby et al 1977, 369; Hdt. 2.77), showing continuity.

### (h, k) Fahaka pufferfish (*Tetraodon lineatus*)

 *špt* (TLA 153960)

The fahaka pufferfish is the only freshwater pufferfish species found in Egypt today, and its characteristic appearance makes it easily recognizable in artistic depictions (Brewer and Friedman, 1989: 80). Its likeness can occasionally be seen in texts outside of the fishing scenes: the word *špt* is used in the Egyptian language as both the name of the fish (TLA 153960) and as the verb “to be angry” (TLA 153970).

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