

FISH TALES AND FANCIES

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"Don't be a fisherman," was the advice of an ancient Egyptian father to his son as he placed him in school among the children of the magistrates. "Study hard at your books so that all the crafts and trades can be avoided, but especially that of fishing—it is more difficult than any other calling!"

Fishing as an occupation in Egypt may have been considered among the lowest a young man could enter, but it has always been important in the economy of the country. The Nile abounds with fish, in great variety and of excellent quality for eating. That fish was relied upon as a staple food is amply attested by the many representations of scenes connected with procuring and preparing fish throughout the 3,000 years of dynastic Egypt—scenes showing common fisherfolk dragging in well-filled nets, cleaning the haul on the banks of the river, cutting the fish for drying and salting, extracting the roe, and selling the catch at the market place. A plan and elevation of the royal granaries and storehouses at el 'Amārneh shows a good-sized storeroom packed tightly with dried fish, row on row, which seems to indicate that it was considered a food fit for kings as well as commoners. Strangers in the land were impressed by the quantity and sweetness of Nile fish, and even those unwilling guests the children of Israel, when they were bemoaning their fate in the wilderness, complained to Moses: "We remember the fish, which we did eat in Egypt freely; the cucumbers, and the melons, and the leeks, and the onions, and the garlick: but now our soul is

dried away: there is nothing at all, beside this manna, before our eyes."

Although fishing as a means of livelihood was to be avoided, as a sport it pleased the gentlemen of ancient Egypt as much as it delights sportsmen the world over today. Some of the most charming scenes that have come down to us are those of the elegant nobleman angling quietly from the bank of his well-stocked garden pool, protected from the mud and dampness by a mat spread over the ground and a chair brought from his villa; or those of a courtier spearing fish from a papyrus skiff in the canals and marshes along the river with the added danger of lurking crocodiles or even hippopotami.

Thus the fish had its very familiar place in the daily life and recreation of the ancient Egyptian. However, as with so many of the simplest creatures and phenomena he found about him, the Egyptian built up in his tradition a mythology and superstition about fish also. In the pantheon of sacred animals they figure to a lesser degree than the cat or the cow or the falcon, but cults did arise that, in later times at least, assumed some importance.

There are, for instance, three specific fish connected with the Osiris myth. Plutarch tells us that Seth tore the body of Osiris into fourteen pieces and scattered it abroad. One of the parts was thrown into the Nile and was consumed by three fish which Plutarch calls the *Lepidotus*, the *Phagrus*, and the *Oxyrhynchus*. He goes on to say that the natives particularly avoided eating these fish.

There has been much speculation on the identity of the three fish. The *Lepidotus* is generally thought to be the *Barbus bynni*, a carplike fish with large, silvery scales, much prized as a food by ancient as well as modern Egyptians. In certain localities the *bynni* was considered sacred and in these places was buried with care in cemeteries set apart for it. The fish second from the left on the opposite page is an example of the *bynni* drawn in an Old Kingdom tomb, and the small bronze amulet illustrated at the lower left in the group on page 188 is a rather less characteristic representation of the Late Dynastic or Ptolemaic period from the Museum collection.

Although many writers have considered the Phagrus to be the eel, its identification as such is not certain. The *Oxyrhynchus* is the *Mormyrus*, recognized by its long downward-turned snout. This fish was especially revered in the city of *Oxyrhynchus*, whose inhabitants, it is said, even refused to eat other fish for fear they might have been caught by a hook once defiled by one of these sacred fish. Plutarch tells us that in his time the people of *Cynopolis*, where the dog was held sacred, were seen eating fish one day, and so their neighbors, the *Oxyrhynchites*, collected all the dogs about and ate them in retaliation. An open feud resulted which the Romans had difficulty in controlling.

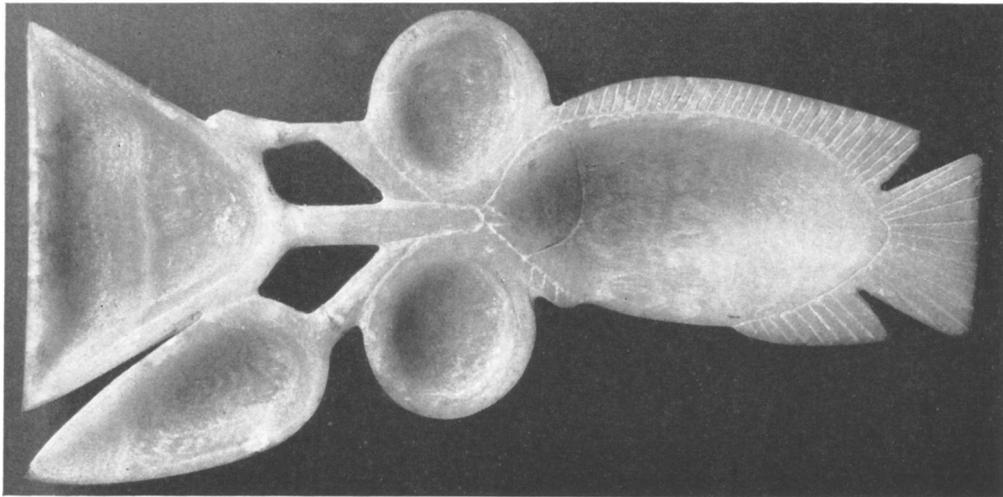
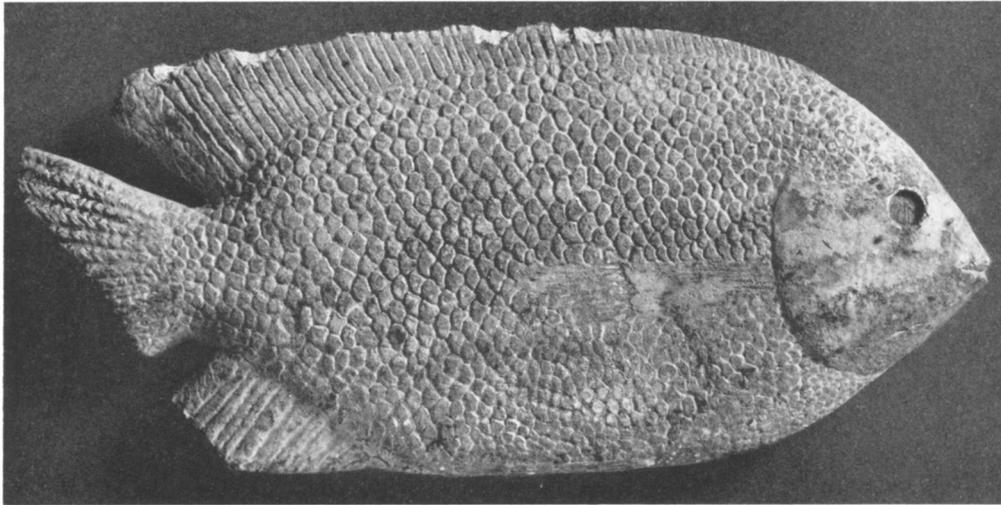
These stories, of course, are obviously hearsay and imagination, and we are on surer ground when we note that of the many species of fish in the Nile only three have thus far been found mummified in any great number—the *bynni*, especially at Thebes, the *Mormyrus* at Behnesa (*Oxyrhynchus*), and the Nile perch (*Lates niloticus*) at Esneh (*Latopolis*) and *Medinet Gurob*. Each of these fish had a special significance in its own city, but the Egyptians as a whole were not influenced to any degree by these local cults. The fish of Mendes, for example, was honored exclusively in Mendes. The patron god of the city, the ram-headed *Khnum*, shared his influence with the goddess *Hat-mehyet*, who was represented as a woman wearing on her head this fish, the symbol of the nome, or district, of Mendes. Rex Engelbach of the Cairo Museum has convincingly

presented the theory that the fish was the *Schilbe mystus*, a member of the catfish family, whose distinguishing characteristics are the single, pointed dorsal fin just behind the head and the long anal fin running along the belly. The blue glass amulet shown on page 188, although very small, is an excellent example of the *Schilbe*.

Another myth concerned with fish, and one that comes to us straight from Egyptian sources, is the story of the sun-god's journey across the sky. According to the *Book of the Dead*, *Rē*, the sun-god, made his daily trip in a boat and was accompanied by a number of gods whose duty it was to navigate the boat successfully in its passage from the eastern part of the sky to that place where *Rē* entered the Underworld to spend the night. *Thot* and *Ma'et* stood on each side of *Horus*, who acted both as steersman and as captain. Before the boat, one on each side, swam the two pilot fish called *abdu* and *onet*. It was a trip fraught with many dangers from the influences of evil, but the course was run regularly day after day, with no little credit going to the pilot fish.

This myth unfortunately gives us no details as far as the fish are concerned. The *abdu*-fish cannot with any certainty be identified at this writing. The *onet*-fish, however, is undoubtedly the *Tilapia nilotica*, the *bolti* of the modern Arabs, valued as food above all Nile fish by ancients and moderns alike. Only the Nile perch can compare in popularity.

Ancient Egyptian records do not indicate that the *bolti* took on any special religious significance because of the part it played in the sun-god's journey. It was the commonest of all the Nile fish and one of the most carefully represented in the various aquatic scenes. The fish at the extreme right in the headband gives a striking example of the accuracy with which it is usually drawn. The ancient Egyptian was quick to realize its decorative possibilities. It swims gracefully among the lotus painted over the surface of faience bowls and goblets; it is at home in practically every pool and pond in scenes of private estates and temple precincts; it swims below the merchant fleets of the Nile and around the fowling skiffs in the marshes.



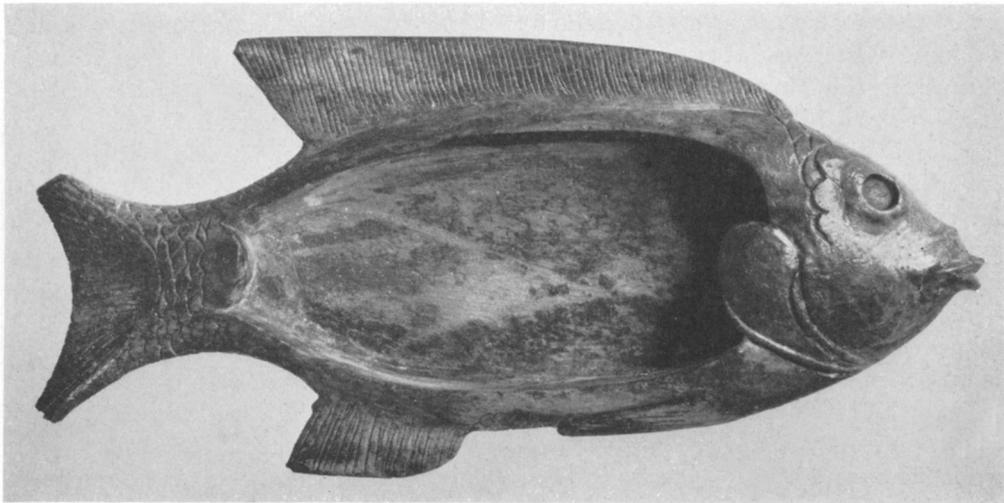
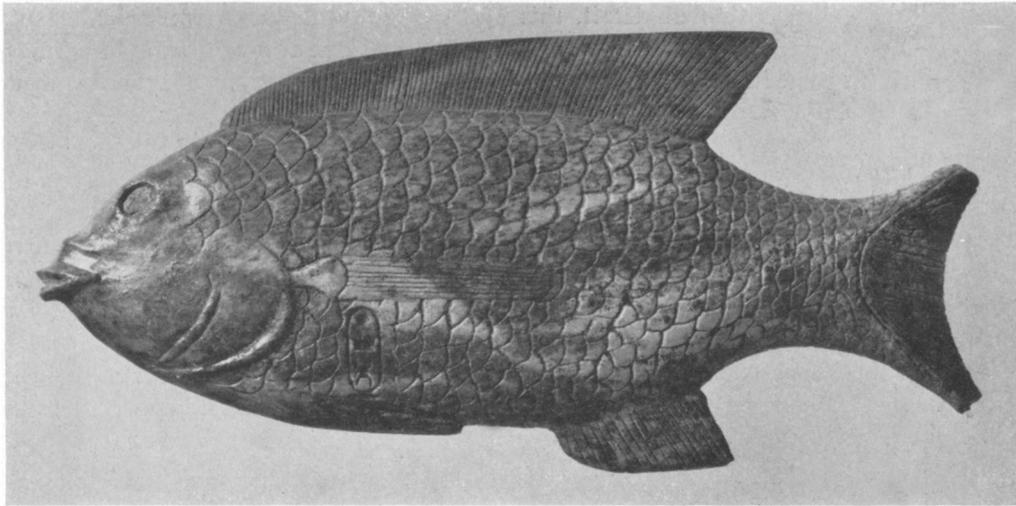
Cosmetic dishes: ABOVE, a bolti (length $5\frac{3}{4}$ inches); BELOW, a bolti swimming among lotus (length 7 inches). Egyptian, about 1400 B.C.

Its pleasing and regular shape with the long, straight dorsal fin lent itself very well to the minor arts and was used from earliest times as a form for vessels connected with the toilet.

The ointment or perfume bottle shown in the group on page 189 (top left) is a beautiful example of its use in the round. The bottle is modeled and hollowed out from one piece of "blue marble," and the details have been simplified to the minimum necessary to identify the fish. No scales are indicated, the coloration of the polished marble suggesting the texture. The open mouth serves as the spout. Both the

mouth and the dorsal fin are unfortunately badly chipped. This bottle was made in the Middle Kingdom, about 2000 B.C., and measures eight inches from tip to tip.

Of all the forms fancifully adapted by the craftsmen for use as cosmetic trays or spoons for the Egyptian lady's dressing table, none were more successfully conceived from the point of view of the form's fitting the purpose than the one above (top) and that on the opposite page. They both represent the *bolti* with less rather than more realism, but the character of the fish is there. Little can be added to the



Two views of a cosmetic dish in the form of a boliti, with the cartouche of Thut-mosē III. Egyptian, about 1450 B.C. Length 7 inches

testimony of the photographs themselves. Both dishes are carved in steatite, the glaze covering that on page 186 being now almost entirely gone, although originally it was a dark green. The cavity for holding the cosmetic was cut out similarly in both dishes, the outline following the contour of the fish from the base of the tail to the gill.

The glaze of the other dish (above) is predominantly a deep olive green, and the piece is so remarkably preserved that it might have come today straight from the royal workshops attached to the palace of Thut-mosē III, whose

cartouche it bears. Its designer took liberties with the *Tilapia nilotica* when he gave it a slightly forked tail instead of a rounded one, improving the line of the dish. Both of these dishes can be dated in the XVIII Dynasty—the one with the cartouche in the reign of Thut-mosē III (about 1450 B.C.), the other slightly later.

The more elaborate cosmetic dish illustrated on page 186 is a typical product of the late XVIII Dynasty. Decorative, bold, dependent more on the beauty of the material and the general effect for its success than on skillful



Blue glass Schilbe

often appears on decorative seals and scarabs of the period. That this theme has any amuletic potency or significance beyond that of being a pleasant decorative fancy is doubtful, any more than the tiny carnelian *bolti* shown at the right on this page or the three conventionalized pendants of gold and green stone at the lower right on page 189, all of the late Empire period.

There remains one pendant for consideration, reserved to last place as a fitting climax in this résumé of the finest examples of ancient Egyptian fish in this Museum. The tiny jewel (shown at lower right) is only three quarters of an inch over all. The body is made of turquoise, the band and attached fins, tail, and loop for suspension of gold. It was found by the Egyptian Expedition in the "fill" of a XII Dynasty tomb at Lisht. This fish is another species of catfish—the *Synodontes batensoda*. It could never be considered beautiful, and its meat is unpleasant to the taste. But it was and is a common Nile fish, and from early times the ancient Egyptians noted and pictured it among the fish most likely to turn up in their nets. One idiosyncrasy of the species is the habit of swimming upside down, and it is almost always represented in this position by the ancient artists (cf. fish at extreme left on p. 184).

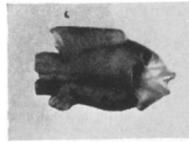


Bronze bynni

Our pendant, in spite of its minute size, admirably portrays this catfish. The powerful spine in the short-rayed section of the dorsal fin is clearly shown, with the adipose section suggested by a hump in the turquoise body of the fish. The pectoral fins with their sharp spines, the small anal fin, and the long, finely rayed tail fin are carefully duplicated. The

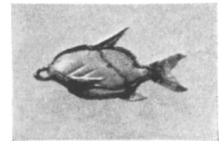
gills are simplified into two incised lines, while a V-shaped demarcation is the only indication of the contrast between the granular figuration on the head and the smooth texture of the body. The ventral fin, the smallest of the set, has been omitted, and the barbels, or whiskers, but the loop has been cleverly placed to give an impression of the snubbed nose to which the whiskers should be appended.

It is a beautiful pendant, skillfully made, and it is a sad mischance that prevents us from knowing something of its owner. It brings to mind a tale in ancient Egyptian literature of



Carnelian bolti

King Snefru of the Old Kingdom and a fish pendant. Weary of his court and its superficialities, the king sought a remedy for his boredom from the magician Zazamonkh. This wise man recommended that he go to a lake in the royal preserves and find diversion in quiet contemplation of the pleasant "nesting places" of the lake. He suggested, however,

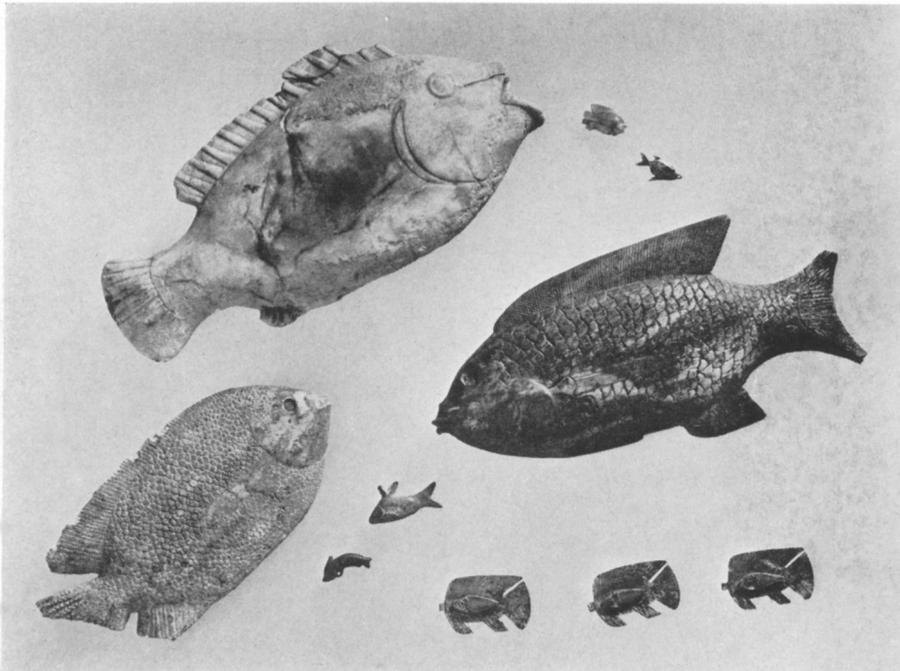


Turquoise catfish

that His Majesty enliven this pastoral scene by taking along a boatload of fair maidens from the harim so that he might also feast his eyes on their rhythmic rowing. The king was delighted with the prospect of this outing and summoned twenty of the most comely young women of the palace. He had them draped in fishnets and provided with ebony and gold paddles, and was very much pleased as he watched them row back and forth across the lake and listened to the beat of their chant. But suddenly the stroke on one side caught an oar in her braids and in disentangling it dropped overboard a turquoise pendant in the form of a fish. She ceased singing and rowing, and the boat was thrown into confusion. She would not resume even though the king promised her an identical pendant. His Majesty was distraught at having his afternoon spoiled and hastily called back the magician, explaining the situation and asking what could be done about it. Zaza-

monkh thereupon "had his say of magic" and placed one side of the water of the lake upon the other, found the fish pendant lying on a piece of broken pot, and returned it to its owner. The lake was twelve cubits deep in the middle and therefore reached twenty-four cubits when folded back, but Zazamonkh reversed his miracle without mishap and was suitably rewarded. The story ends as the king and his entire palace celebrate.

The fish described in this article, together with others from the Egyptian collection, are now on exhibition in the Eleventh Egyptian Gallery. The headband, from a fishing scene in the tomb of Ty at Saqqāreh (Old Kingdom), was drawn by Lindsley F. Hall. The amulets on page 188 are reproduced actual size. Full versions of the precept at the beginning of the article and the story at the end may be found in Blackman, The Literature of the Ancient Egyptians.



Egyptian fish shown in the previous pages, with a perfume bottle (TOP LEFT) and three pendants (LOWER RIGHT). Arranged and photographed by Edward J. Milla