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**EXAMPLES OF TERRACOTTA MODELS OF NILE BOATS
FROM THE PTOLEMAIC AND ROMAN PERIODS.
SYMBOLISM AND SIGNIFICANCE**

ABSTRACT The subject of this article is terracottas depicting boats, whose original designs could have been utilized for navigation on the Nile. Like other terracotta artefacts they are prone to various interpretations, including religious, cultic, symbolic, and even more prosaic interpretations. The primary hypothesis presented in this text suggests that their symbolic significance is associated with the household cult of individuals particularly connected with navigating the waters of the Nile.

Key words: model of a boat, terracotta, Ptolemaic-Roman Egypt

ABSTRAKT Tematem tego artykułu są terakotowe zabytki przedstawiające modele łodzi, których pierwotne projekty mogły być wykorzystywane do żeglugi na Nilu. Podobnie jak inne artefakty sztuki koroplastów, wspomniane relikty można przypisać szeregowi znaczeń, obejmujących religijne, kultowe, symboliczne, a nawet bardziej prozaiczne interpretacje. Główna hipoteza przedstawiona w tym tekście sugeruje, że ich symboliczne znaczenie wiąże się z kultem domowym osób szczególnie związanych z obsługą żeglugi na wodach Nilu.

The use of the Nile River as a means of communication¹, a transport artery, both internally and externally (commercial and military²), has been extensively studied from various perspectives, involving historical, papyrological and archaeological research. A series of publications not only presents the waterway as a means of transportation but also comprehensively addresses various issues associated with river traffic management and its security. For example: “Sailing on the Nile during the Hellenistic Age” by Lucia Rossi³ or Thomas Kruse’s “The Nile Police in the Ptolemaic Period”⁴ present distinct aspects of this river in both historical and archaeological contexts. Both the river itself, and all the elements associated with it, possess a speculative multidimensional expression, allowing for broad definitions in both symbolic contexts and a more pragmatic dimension related to the economic and political functioning of ancient Egypt.

In this article, we specifically focus on interpreting a number of terracotta artefacts, particularly boat models⁵ in The British Museum’s collection, dating back to the Hellenistic and Roman period.⁶ The terracotta models, along with other coroplastic objects likewise bearing motifs of rivers, navigation, and watercourses, can serve multiple purposes.⁷ They hold symbolic significance,⁸ including religious or cultic representations. Additionally, they serve practical functions, potentially as alternatives to toys for children, but also as intrinsic bearers of the Egyptian religious tradition, strongly linked to the life-giving River Nile.

On the other hand, considering the wide range of terracotta production in Egypt during the Hellenistic and Roman Periods, it is not accurate

⁵ Utility boat models are also known from other periods; see, for example: Tooley 1986: 189-192.

⁶ Also, see the intriguing terracotta figurines depicting a boat with Harpocrates, published by Paula Perdrizet (1921: 115-116, nr 300, Pl. XXXII).

⁷ Bailey 2008: 135.

⁸ For example, see paper Dorian Vanhulle (2018: 173-187) about boat symbolism in Predynastic and Early Dynastic.

¹ Butzer 2001: 543-551; Khalil 2010: 33-48.

² Van’t Dack E., H. Hauben, 1978: 60-63.

³ Rossi 2022: 165-192.

⁴ Kruse 2013: 172-184.

to solely associate terracotta artifacts, including their iconography, with purely religious objects. While many of them incorporate religious imagery, it is plausible to interpret them within broader contexts, including domestic religious practices within households or within the structure of temples and sanctuaries. The existing literature on this subject is extensive, covering various aspects of history, religion, and archaeology, providing a rich resource for further exploration and study.

In the collections of the British Museum, there are two fascinating terracotta boat models featured in Donald M. Bailey's catalogue. The first one portrays a Nile boat transporting a cargo of amphorae, dating back to the Ptolemaic period (no 3537_{GR}),⁹ specifically the second or first century BC. This description is taken from Bailey; A small boat, a lighter, moving to the right, with a naked macrophallic steersman reclining against the elevated stern.¹⁰ The cargo consists of stacked Ptolemaic-style amphorae, each sealed at the mouth, while at the bow, a spherical jar lies on its side. The boat is stands on a high, waisted oval plinth.¹¹

Another example is a terracotta model of a Nile boat from the Roman period, dating back to the first or second century AD (no 3538_{GR}).¹² This model, discovered by the British School of Archaeology in Egypt at Oxyrhynchus, features a rounded double-arched cabin. The boat has a high, knobbed, and pointed stern, as well as rounded bows. It is likely that the original construction material was either reed or wood with reed features. Determining the exact purpose of this vessel's full-size counterpart is challenging. It is possible that it served as both a pleasure boat and a cargo vessel, as suggested by Donald Bailey.¹³

While these two different boat models suggest different uses, especially when considering their appearance, they do share a broader universal characteristic related with the rich symbolism of boats (for example in eschatology) in the ancient world, including Egyptian culture.¹⁴ What

seems highly probable, considering the fact that they could have functioned as symbols referring to journeys (means of transport) to the spiritual world, pilgrimages; or also, as I believe, find their justification as symbols identified with divinity, for example like Osiris. But not only.



Fig. 1. (no 3537_{GR}) Terracotta model of a boat transporting amphorae. After, Donald M. Bailey, *Catalogue of the Terracottas in the British Museum*, vol. VI, *Ptolemaic and Roman Terracottas from Egypt*, London 2008: 144, pl. 99

On the other hand, the extensive production of terracottas in Egypt during the Hellenistic and Roman periods, as well as the wide range of diverse iconographic themes, significantly encourages a much broader interpretation, ruling out a strict association solely with objects of a cultic nature. However, in the case of the artefacts under discussion, it is possible to hypothesize about their primary significance in a religious cultic context. In this respect, like other terracotta objects whose iconography remains religious, their purpose within the domain of worship in domestic spaces or sanctuaries raises little doubt, the situation is somewhat different for boat models. Although various analogies unequivocally refer to the ritual and cultic sphere, the interpretation of these artefacts may extend much further. This fact is not

⁹ Bailey 2008: 144, pl. 99.

¹⁰ As point out Bailey, 'the 'comparand' (none is close) often have Harpocrates on the boat, but some of the personages shown need not be that god' (Bailey 2008: 135).

¹¹ Wider description including certain analogies, see D.M. Bailey (Bailey 2008: 144, pl. 99)

¹² Moore details see D.M. Bailey (Bailey 2008: 144-145, pl. 99)

¹³ Wider description including certain analogies, see D.M. Bailey (Bailey 2008: 135).

¹⁴ Landström 1970.

only associated with the ancient world, as broadly understood, but as noted by, among others, David Frankfurter, small boats, and other votive forms can sometimes be found as deposits at certain Muslim sanctuaries.¹⁵

The interesting fact remains, in the case of this one monument dating back to the Ptolemaic period, we are dealing with a depiction of transported goods in the form of amphorae. This undoubtedly should be interpreted as a real reflection of the function of an actual boat, as a transport vessel. However, in the context of symbolism, hypotheses could be formulated identifying amphorae with a much broader symbolic dimension, especially of a Dionysian nature.

Undoubtedly, both the cargo itself and the fact that we are dealing with boat models lean towards an interpretation of a religious and votive nature, perhaps offered as a votive offering or gift by individuals involved in the service of actual boats navigating the waters of the Nile. These artifacts have characteristics and significance as memorabilia, suggesting the profession of their owners, whose religiosity particularly may relate, on an individual piety, to aspects identified with the life-giving nature of the Nile. In this context, the terracotta models under discussion may have some connection with the individual religiosity of the sailor. Common sense dictates that terracotta models of Nile boats were used in religious and private ceremonies when they were dedicated to the goddess Isis.¹⁶ According to Steve Vinson: "In the Greco-Roman period the goddess Isis spread throughout the eastern Mediterranean and, with it, something of the Egyptians' nautical symbolism."¹⁷ Moreover, as he points out, Isis was particularly venerated by sailors since her astral connections made her important to navigation.¹⁸ In this aspect of the goddess Isis, her identification with Sothis is also important. From Hellenistic and Roman Egypt, especially during Roman times, we know numerous terracotta figurines called Isis-Sothis.¹⁹ It should be also noted, that the Roman author Apuleius in the *Metamorphosis* (11) describes a ritual, as has been pointed out by, for example, Vinson, designed to ensure a safe sailing season that involved consecrating a special ship to Isis.²⁰

In summary, it can be asserted that the models of Nile boats under discussion, facilitate a broad symbolic identification. In this regard, like other terracottas, they may hold both symbolic and speculative meanings. Hence, we may infer that the terracottas discussed here played a significant role in shaping the personal beliefs of individuals involved in navigating the Nile.



Fig. 2. (no 3538_{GR}). Terracotta model of a Nile boat. After, Donald M. Bailey, *Catalogue of the Terracottas in the British Museum*, vol. VI, *Ptolemaic and Roman Terracottas from Egypt*, London 2008: 144-145, pl. 99.

¹⁵ Frankfurter 2018: 128

¹⁶ Vinson 1994: 51.

¹⁷ Vinson 1994: 51; More about Isis as a goddess of the seas, see Bricault 2020.

¹⁸ Vinson 1994: 51.

¹⁹ Jędraszek 2020: 27-29.

²⁰ Vinson 1994: 51.

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