

A BESTIARY OF ANCIENT NUBIA

A Special Exhibition
April 16–August 16, 2026
isac.uchicago.edu/bestiarynubia

INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF ANCIENT CULTURES MUSEUM





An Exploited Resource

Ancient Nubia, a region located along the Nile River in what is today southern Egypt and northern Sudan, had a long-standing relationship with both wild and domesticated animals—swine, cattle, bovids, fish, and others—that played a crucial role in the region's economy, culture, and symbolism. In the Late Neolithic (ca. 4500 BCE), a clear break occurred. Agriculture became the new standard, with extensive crops testifying to the almost absolute importance of domestic animals, of which livestock species formed the majority. Hunting wild animals was no longer a priority for humans.

Relief-Decorated Bowl

Faience

Egypt/Sudan

Third Intermediate Period, Dynasty 25 (747–656 BCE)

Charles Edwin Wilbour Fund, 1916

Brooklyn Museum 74.98.1

Cattle, Birds & Fishes

Cattle were central to agriculture, food, and social status. Nubian rock art includes iconography of long-horned cattle, often in herding or ritual scenes. In addition to domesticated cattle, sheep and goats were among the earliest domesticated animals in the Nile Valley. Because goats were less dependent on water than cattle, they were favored by shepherds in semiarid parts of Nubia. Birds held symbolic and economic importance in Nubian culture. Hunted and possibly domesticated, birds such as falcons and vultures were revered in both Egyptian and Nubian iconography. Birds were believed to be messengers between worlds, especially *ba*-birds, which represented part of the soul. Fish were an important part of Nubian rituals and a key source of food. The Nile provided a wide variety of fish, including tilapia, catfish, and the Nile perch.

Ba Statue

Sandstone, paint

Nubia, Ballana, Tomb B245

Meroitic phase IIIB-IV (225-300 CE)

Excavated in 1963

ISACM E22487





Wild & Dangerous

In ancient Nubia, the savanna environment hosted a range of wild animals that were both part of the natural ecosystem and deeply integrated into the culture, economy, and symbolism of Nubian societies. Among the wild bovids, the ram played the most important role in the Nubian cosmogony, specifically when identified as the god Amun of Napata, the ancient capital of the Kushite kings. Reptiles, such as the cobra, and felines, such as the lion, also played major roles in royal pageantry. They were sometimes hybridized in Nubian iconography, as exemplified by the lion-god Apedemak, represented in temple reliefs with the bottom half of his body shaped as a snake.

Ram's-Head Amulet

Gold

Egypt/Sudan

Third Intermediate Period, Dynasty 25 (747–656 BCE)

Gift of Norbert Schimmel Trust, 1989

Metropolitan Museum of Art 1989.281.98

Elephants, Hippopotami, & Insects

African elephants were valued for the ivory of their tusks, a major trade commodity. Symbols of military strength and royalty, they were common in ancient Nubian savannas, particularly near the grasslands of the Nile River. Extensive agriculture and intensive hunting for ivory pushed the animals to migrate south, along with the hippopotamus. Insects had both positive and negative effects on farming, as pollinators and crop pests, respectively. Nubians practiced agriculture along the Nile floodplains, which, along with the arid climate, created fertile environments for many insect species. Among them, scarab beetles held a particular symbolic meaning in Nubia, notably when shaped as amulets in funerary contexts.

Plaque with Two Crocodiles and Two Hippopotami

Steatite

Nubia, Qustul, Tomb W43

Third Intermediate Period, Dynasty 25 (747–656 BCE)

Excavated in 1964

ISACM E23884





Human's Best Companions

Few animal species were welcomed by the ancient Nubians as part of their household. Dogs and cats were particularly favored, and monkeys were a source of entertainment. Nubian craftsmen often represented these companions as mimicking human poses and attitudes. The monkey is the most subject to that claim—to the point where it can serve as a substitute for humans in certain activities, such as brushing the hair of its master or pressing grapes for making wine. In late antiquity, the dog could even replace the lion in royal propaganda, vanquishing the enemies of the state alongside the king.

Prince Arikankharor Slaying His Enemies

Sandstone (exhibition replica in resin)

Unknown location (Meroe?)

Meroitic period (270–350 CE)

Purchased in 1922

Worcester Art Museum 1922.145

Canids, Equids, & Monkeys

The dog was domesticated as early as the sixth millennium BCE. Several species of dog exist in the Nile Valley, including the saluki with its floppy ears and thin muzzle. Often depicted on a leash or sitting beside their master or under a chair, dogs also guarded prisoners and accompanied the king in battle. The horse is closely related to the art of war. Introduced into Nubia through Egypt around 1650 BCE, the horse was the best companion of Nubian archers, the latter being sometimes hired as mercenaries. Two species of monkey were well known in the Nile Valley: the cercopithecus and the baboon. Through Nubia, elite Egyptians imported small monkeys from the sub-Saharan region.

Facsimile of Nubians with a Giraffe and a Monkey

Nina de Garis Davies (1881–1965)

Tempera on paper

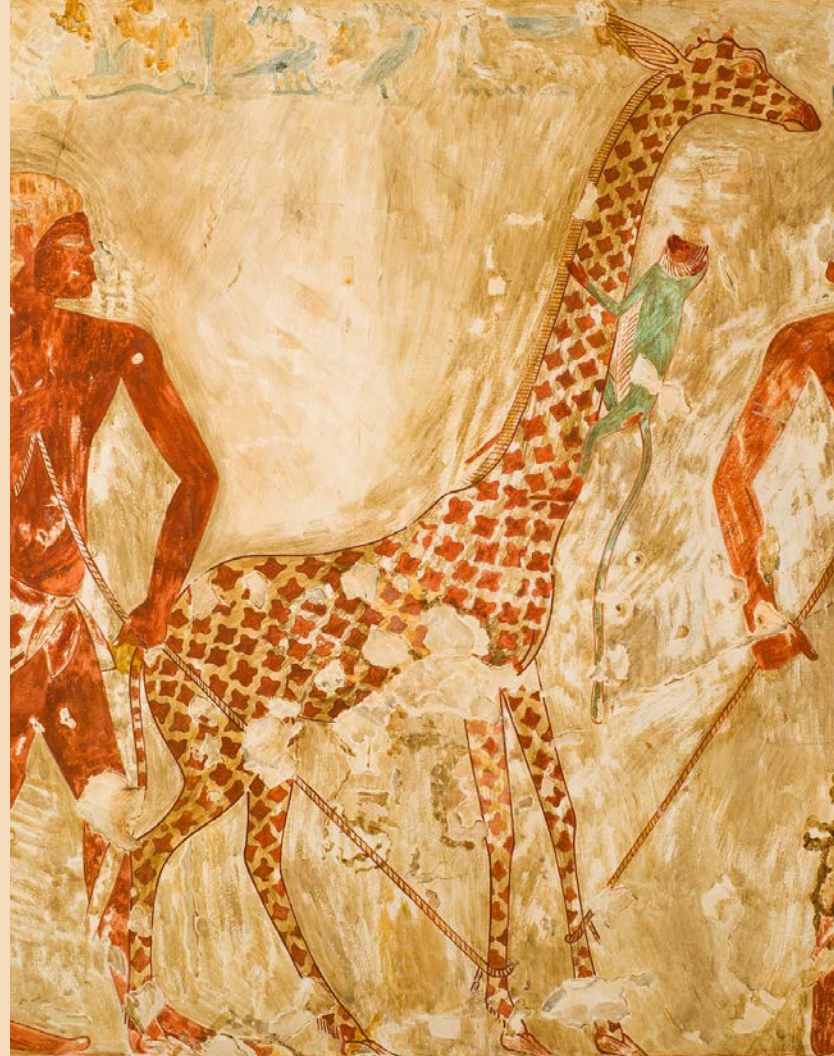
Original: Egypt, Thebes, Sheikh Abd el-Qurna,

Tomb of Rekhmire (TT 100)

New Kingdom, Dynasty 18 (ca. 1504–1425 BCE)

Rogers Fund, 1931

Metropolitan Museum of Art 31.6.40





The Nubian Landscape & Ecosystem

The Middle Nile Valley underwent significant transformations from the Late Neolithic through the early medieval period, with profound consequences for fauna. Climatic changes and the development of agropastoralism modified the savannas and grasslands. At the end of the Neolithic period, a shift toward aridity began. Reduced rainfall led to a decline in vegetation, transforming rich pastures into deserts. This contraction pushed humans and animals toward the Nile Valley. Since the behavior of wild animals conflicts with that of farmers and pastoralists, the cultivated banks of the Nile were subject to constant strife between humans and wildlife. Low reproductive rates and intensive hunting for skins, horns, and ivory led to local extinctions. Today, the remaining wildlife is confined to a few isolated areas, such as the Red Sea Hills.

Hyena Jar

Baked clay, paint

Sudan, Semna South Cemetery, Tomb N224

Meroitic period (270 BCE–350 CE)

Excavated in 1966–68

ISACM E35579



Incense Burner

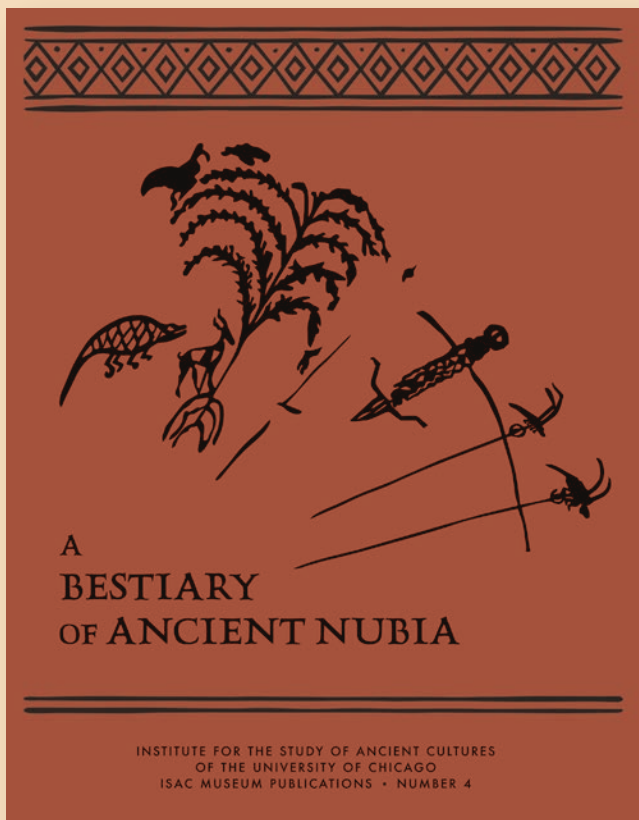
Limestone (with modern restoration)

Nubia, Qustul, Tomb L24

A-Group period (3200–3100 BCE)

Excavated in 1964

ISACM E24069



Published in conjunction with *A Bestiary of Ancient Nubia*, a special exhibition of the Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures at the University of Chicago, this sumptuously illustrated volume edited by chief curator Marc Maillot examines the many roles animals played in Nubian life, art, religion, and economy from prehistory through the medieval period. Ten scholarly essays, each focused on a different category of animals and the ways the ancient Nubians observed, depicted, and exploited them, illuminate the close and complex relationship between humans and the fauna and landscape of the Middle Nile Valley. The detailed catalog presents all the objects displayed in the exhibition. Together, the essays and catalog offer both a thematic study and a visual record of Nubia's rich animal world.

bit.ly/bestiarynubia



Join us for Nubian Month in May 2026

1st	7-9pm	Documentary film and ISAC Visiting Scholar lecture with Salah Ahmed (prerecorded): <i>Nubia: The Forgotten Kingdom</i>	20th	7-9pm	ISAC Visiting Scholar lecture with Stuart Smith: “Kushite Internationalism and the Iron Age Phoenician Style (900-600 BCE)”
6th	7-9pm	ISAC lecture series with Bruce Williams: “The Challenge of Archaeology in Emergency” and Marc Maillot book signing: <i>A Bestiary of Ancient Nubia</i>	22nd	6-8pm	Documentary film series: <i>African Empires, Part 3: Burkina Faso</i>
8th	6-8pm	Documentary film series: <i>African Empires, Part 1: South Africa</i>	27th	7-9pm	ISAC Visiting Scholar lecture with Vincent Francigny: “Sudan: A Cultural Heritage at Risk”
9th	5-7pm	ARCE lecture and book signing with Rita Freed: <i>Ancient Nubian Art: A History</i>	28th	7-9pm	ISAC Visiting Scholar lecture with Artur Obłuski: “A Treasure Box Buried in Sand, Africana Byzantina from Nubia”
13th	7-9pm	ISAC Visiting Scholar lecture with Séverine Marchi: “Kerma-Dukki Gel: A Century of Archaeological Research in Northern Sudan and New Opportunities for Collaboration to Protect Heritage”	29th	6-8pm	Documentary film series: <i>African Empires, Part 4: Sudan</i>
15th	6-8pm	Documentary film series: <i>African Empires, Part 2: Mali</i>	30th	1-4pm	Youth & Family community event in Breasted Hall, LaSalle Banks Room and galleries: Performance by HERitage emBODYment

* ISAC lectures will be available on our YouTube page following the posted dates.

Visit the ***A Bestiary of Ancient Nubia***
special exhibition webpage:

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THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

**INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF
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West Asia & North Africa

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