

THE BEE "bit"  IN EGYPTIAN AND GREEK RELIGION

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**Abstract:**

*The history of the bee in ancient cultures was a common area for studying primitive cultures and was referred to in the idea that myths originated from ritualistic acts. The bee hieroglyph which was noted on inscriptions from the time of the first dynasty until the end of the Graeco-Roman period was a well-known symbol for royalty for nearly four thousand years. The prevalence of this particular bee hieroglyph on tombs, statues, wall paintings other types of bee hieroglyphs in Egyptian writing, indicates the sundry functions of bee-keeping and honey whether secular or religious.*

**1. Introduction**

Historically, bees have fascinated people; they were highly regarded by the ancient Egyptians [1]. The bee has played a significant role in human cultures, since the time of the ancient Egyptians and till the end of the Graeco-Roman Era, and as a result, has become a well-known symbol in myths around the world [2]. The nature and origin of the bee have awakened the curiosity and interest of man. For thousands of years, honey was the only sweetening material known, and it is quite natural that in ancient times, the little busy creature that produced this sweet food should have been regarded with reverence and awe [3]. The pervasiveness of beekeeping, the elevated status of the bee as a symbol, and the multifarious uses of honey and wax in sacred rituals in ancient Egypt founded the customs and beliefs that would become significant later in Greek culture and religion [4].

**2. Methodological Studies**

The planned research design, data collection, and analysis of results will be explained. This research article discusses the bee in Egyptian and Greek religions. The aim of this study is to demonstrate how the ancient Egyptian and Greek represented the bees and their religious significance. The research depends on data collection from many references, objects, and scenes depicting bees in many tombs and temples. Here, the researcher studies the bees and their relation with religious myths, such as the myth tears of the sun god *Ra* and the myth of Zeus "Melissaios" or the "Bee-man. In addition, the researcher examines the role of deities related to the bees, such as Goddess Neith, Hathor, Aristaios, and Hera. The research will rely on pictorial evidence from ancient Egyptian and Greek sources to prove this study, and then it will present results, discussion of the study, and finally conclusions.

### 3. The Bee "bit" in Egyptian Religion

The sign of bee was used to express its name, the bee was known as "c<sup>c</sup>fy"  [5], they were also called "c<sup>c</sup>fy n bit"  Honey fly [5], it was usually shortened to "bit"  in ancient Egyptian language and this same word was used for honey, but with the addition of a jar and three strokes  during the 20<sup>th</sup> dynasty, another type of jar "mnt"  was used to refer to the word honey [6]. Bees have appeared in mythology and folklore, through all phases of art and literature from ancient times to the present day, it cannot be disputed that the ancient Egyptians attached great religious and spiritual significance to the bee and the honey [7].

#### 3.1. The bee in Egyptian mythology "salt magical papyrus: The salt 825 papyrus"

The Bee was a vast presence in religious rites; the bee was not only a royal symbol but also a signifier of the divine. This is made clearer by the fact that the bee was associated with the sun god *Ra*  [8], the creator of the world. According to ancient Egyptian mythology, the origin of bees, when son-god *Ra* weeps and his tears fell onto the earth, the water which flows from his eyes upon the ground turns into bees, their wax, and honey. This made the god *Ra* closely associated with bees [9]. Although honey bees may have been created from the tears of the sun god *Ra*, he is not the most ancient Egyptian deity to have an association with bees and honey. The deities Neith, Nut, Min, and Hathor also have links to bees and honey, and their mythologies predate *Ra* [10].

#### 3.2. Deities related to the bees "Goddess Neith

Neith [11] was believed to be the mother of all life, including gods and humans. During the New Kingdom, she was thought

of as the mother of *Ra* (who in turn created honey bees) [10]. The goddess Neith can be traced back to the beginning of the first dynasty which was associated with the delta region and represented by the hieroglyph of a honey bee. She was revered in Sais, the capital of Egypt at the time, and her temple at Sais was called "per-bit" , which translates to "House of the Bee" [12]. Moreover, texts mention "Ht-bit" , which translates to "The palace of bee" [13]. Neith's importance during the twenty-sixth dynasty may have influenced the beekeeping reliefs found in the tomb TT279 of Pabasa and tomb TT414 of Ankh-her, fig. (1-a) [14]. Unlike the relief at the Solar Temple of king Nyuser Ra (2445-2421B.C.) of the fifth dynasty at Abu Ghorab, north of Abusir, [1] and the painted scene in the tomb TT100 of Rekhmire, which shows beekeeping and honey-processing activities, the two twenty-sixth dynasty tombs illustrate more honorable scenes, fig. (1-b) [15].

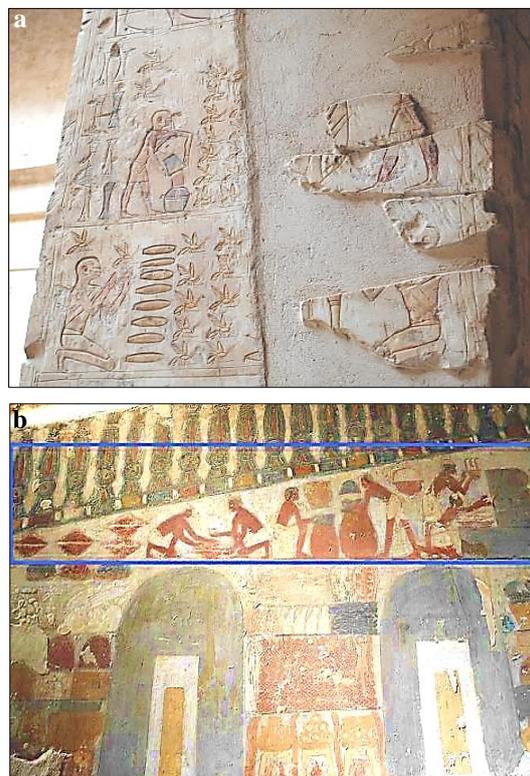


Figure (1) Shows **a.** bekeeping relief in the tomb of Pabasa TT279 (After: Snape, 2011), **b.** Beekeeping relief in the (blue box) tomb of Rekhmire TT100 (After: Kritsky, 2015)

## 4. The Bee "bit" in Greek Religion

The bee was known as "μέλισσα" (méli<sup>ssa</sup>) in the Greek language which in turn comes from μέλι (meli), honey [16]. Beekeeping did not become prominent in Greece until around 600 B.C. Nevertheless, similar symbolic associations with the bee remained intact as beekeeping began to flourish in Greek society [17]. The bees were associated with the gods and its products were used in countless sacred rituals. Bee was closely associated with the birth and death of the soul [18]. There is a renowned relationship between gods and bees, including Zeus, Hermes, Dionysus, and Aphrodite [19]. Additionally, he details how Hermes, Apollo, Artemis, and Demeter were known to have had bee priestesses; these flesh-abstaining nymphs could prophesy only when fed honey [12].

### 4.1. The bee in Greek mythology

#### 4.1.1. Aristaios "patron god of beekeeping"

According to Greek mythology, Aristaios, son of Apollo was the god of beekeeping. Aristaios was taught the art of beekeeping by the Nymphs of Mount Pelion, then taught the Greeks how to maintain beehives and harvest honey, earning him the appellation of the patron god of beekeeping [20].

#### 4.1.2. Zeus "Melissaios" or the "beeman"

Greek mythology is full of stories with bees, the most well-known being the sacred bees that fed and nursed Zeus when, his mother Rhea had hidden him from his father Cronus on Mount Ida on the island of Crete [21], fig. (2). Zeus' connection with bees was so prominent that the bee was his emblem on the currency in some Cretan cities [22]. One of Zeus' children was similarly anointed with a bee title, "Meliteus," who went on to become a hero and found a town called "Melita, the honey-town" [2].



Figure (2) Shows an ancient Greek amphora depicts four men being stung by bees after attempting to steal honey from the hives that nourished the infant Zeus, a catalogue of the Greek and Etruscan Vases in the British Museum (B177) (After: [https://www.britishmuseum.org/col-lection/object/G\\_1847-0716-1](https://www.britishmuseum.org/col-lection/object/G_1847-0716-1)) (15/2/2023)

## 4.2. Deities related to the bees

### 4.2.1. The goddess Hera

The goddess Hera represented youth and offered honey to the gods so that they would avoid aging and Artemis the goddess of earth was depicted as half woman, half bee, fig. (3). [18].



Figure (3) Shows bee-goddess associated with Artemis, above female head, gold plaque, 7<sup>th</sup> century B.C., British Museum (After: [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/a1/Plaque\\_bee-goddess\\_BM\\_GR1860.4-123.4.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/a1/Plaque_bee-goddess_BM_GR1860.4-123.4.jpg)). (15/2/2023).

### 4.2.2. Aphrodite

Aphrodite's prophetic abilities were by means of her association with the bee. Golden Aphrodite brings the honey of life to all she touches; she renders the person, and the occasion, luminous, and incandescent, she gives it the blessing of timelessness, but she is not bound to stay [23].

## 5. Results

The ancient Egyptians highly respected specific insects; the beetle was worshipped as god Kheper, who represents the rising or morning sun. The fly represented bravery

and courage, as golden fly pendants were granted to the high officials as a reward for military achievements. Bees were highly regarded by the ancient Egyptian till the Graeco-Roman period. Bees have been featured in myths around the world. Bees have appeared through all phases of art and literature from ancient times to the present day, it cannot be disputed that the ancient Egyptians attached great religious and spiritual significance to the bee and the honey. Honeybee was appreciated for their honey, the main sweetener for many foodstuffs. Bees were also related to several gods in the ancient Egyptian pantheon; the fact that made them of great importance, it is featured notably in many temples and tombs. Moreover, temples kept bees in order to satisfy the gods with honey.

## 6. Discussion

It is challenging to study the religious aspects of the bee in two eras in one paper. However, the presented paper tried to clarify these aspects in each era and refer the reader to other studies to learn more about deities related to bees in the ancient Egyptian and Greek religions. The religious significance of bees and deities related to them was illustrated by Muller, Wegner, Ransome, McLeish, and Smith who mentioned the usage of honey in religious rituals in the temple. The research illustrated the symbolism of bees whether epigraphical or pictorial in the relief representing beekeeping in tombs dating back to the new kingdom which contains scenes reflecting the importance of beekeeping that flourished during this era. Among these tombs are tomb TT279 of Pabasa and tomb TT100 of Rekhmire. The research will help researchers who are interested in studying the depiction of insects and it allows them to study the bees and compare them with other insects that spread in ancient Egypt, such as flies.

## 7. Conclusion

*Apiculture, the art of beekeeping, was an important part of life in many ancient civi-*

*lizations. There are countless stories, poems, songs, and artworks depicting honey bees and their valued place in society. Bees have appeared in mythology and folklore, through all phases of art and literature from ancient times to the present, and were also related to several gods in the ancient Egyptian pantheon; the fact that made them of great importance. The bee was frequently used in ancient Egyptian texts throughout ancient Egyptian history down to the Roman period, as it was strictly associated with the royal ideology designating the king as the sovereign of Lower Egypt. The historical evidence confirmed that the ancient Egyptians were the first to practice Bee keeping and honey preservation and extraction in history. The ancient Greeks raised honey bees and considered honey to be sacred in addition to nutritious and delicious. They created artwork, wrote poems, and created songs praising honey and the sacred honey bee. Honey is mentioned in around 200 different Greek epigrams (short poems) including various works by the legendary Greek poet, Homer.*

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