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## Cache of crocodiles at Hamra Dom – Qena

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### Abstract

The recent discoveries by archeologists at the site of Hamra dom (Qina, El-tariff mountain) show kind of crocodile worship as what was known at Kom Ombo (Upper Egypt) and El Fayom. The article tries to answer many questions about this discovery; where these crocodiles were breeding? Did they breed in a regular manner as a part of the local crocodile cult or not? Whether it was as votive offerings or there was another aim. That the article also discusses the archaeological evidence for the existing of crocodiles in such dry place and clears the reason for its mummification and the methods of its mummification. The article compares between a recently discovered crocodile mummies in the town of Qina and the multitude of crocodile mummies discovered in other cemeteries throughout the Fayum and kom ompo.

### Key words

(Crocodile; Sobek; the cache; Qena; Faiyum; Kom Ombo)

## المستخلص:

كانت التماسيح رغم خطورتها وشراستها لها من القداسة والتبجيل ما أدى الى تحنيط المصرى القديم لها ودفنها فى جبانات خاصة بها، ولعل خبيئة تماسيح قرية حمرا دوم بجبل الطارف بقنا كانت أحدث ما تم العثور عليه من جبانات أكدت على تقديس التماسيح والحفاظ عليها وحنيطها فى مصر القديمة، ولقد كان التماسيح رمز للإله "سوبك" الذى انتشرت عبادته فى مصر القديمة فى مناطق عدة كان أهمها كوم أمبو والفيوم. يجيب البحث على تساؤلات عدة أهمها: أسباب تحنيط التماسيح وخطوات التحنيط، والغرض الذى من أجله عمل المصرى القديم على تحنيط التماسيح. ويقارن البحث بين خبيئة تماسيح قرية حمرا دوم، وبين ما عثر عليه فى جبانات الفيوم وكوم أمبو.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** (التمساح؛ سوبك؛ الخبيئة؛ قنا؛ الفيوم؛ كوم أمبو)

**Introduction:**

Hamra Dom (El-Qasr WA Es-Saiyad) is located on the eastern bank of the Nile, anciently in the Seventh Upper Egyptian Nome. A series of elite rock-cut graves were discovered in this cemetery. Recently the archaeologists have been excavated a cache of a crocodile in the Hamra Dam village at the mountain of El-tariff, the cache was a piece of a huge cemetery contains more than six rooms, among of these rooms there was the cache which contains dozens of crocodile mummies, some of the tools, and mortuary remains. The cache shows crocodiles worship in this place and ritual acts of god Sobek. Amazing that; the place where the cache was discovered, was far away from



any water supply, so how to discover such these crocodile mummies in such dry place?

Richards and many other scholars was obvious Sävè-Söderbergh's book, which considered one of the most important books<sup>1</sup>, it discussed Hamra Dom elite cemetery, but no one discusses the crocodile's cemetery, which found there, so I try to study this theme to clear the role of a crocodile in this place, and the cult of Sobek in this cemetery.

### **The Nile crocodile:**

The Nile crocodile is reaching up to five meters (18 feet) in length or more than, and weighing up to a massive 775 kilograms, in ancient times the crocodile-inhabited the entire length of the Nile and the streamlined body has long served as an iconic image of ancient Egypt. <sup>2</sup> Pooley discussed The Nile crocodile saying; it should be split into two species, the two species of Nile crocodile inhabiting respectively the lagoons and wetlands of the forested West and Central African region (*Crocodilus suchus*), and the plains and savannas of eastern Africa (*C. niloticus*). *C. suchus* is believed to be smaller and less aggressive and perhaps, therefore, less likely to attack humans. Both species inhabited the Nile River in early historical times, and apparently Ancient Egyptian priests selected the smaller more docile species (*suchus*) for ceremonies and temple life<sup>3</sup>.

**Breeding the crocodile:**

There is a strong relationship between the crocodiles and river as a source of water, Molcho connected between breeding the crocodile and the Fayum Lake, as a very important place for breeding the crocodile in the Greco-roman period<sup>4</sup>. If we apply the same thing in Hamra Dom village, we can say that the flexing place at Qina was the suitable place for breeding the crocodile in ancient Egypt

**Early dynastic Crocodile's burials:**

Many crocodile tombs have been found in Egypt since the pre-dynastic period. In the Hierakonpolis cemetery, HK29A has found skeletal remains of a crocodile buried on this site<sup>5</sup>. Perhaps the purpose of this burial was to eliminate the chaos and evil that the crocodile symbolized in that period<sup>6</sup>. Friedman and his team excavated a crocodile's tomb at HK cemetery, its tomb (Tomb 65) or perhaps more accurately, its crocodile-shaped hole was situated just beyond the corner of the cemetery. The bones had been badly disturbed. (Fig: 1-2) The tomb dates to the Early Dynastic period or possibly even later. The body was originally oriented to face outward, toward the wadi; His role was apparently to stand guard.<sup>7</sup>

**Mummification of crocodiles:**

The ancient Egyptians not only mummified humans, they also mummified a great variety of animals. Mummified animals comprise four types: pet mummies, food mummies, sacred animals and votive mummies<sup>8</sup>. According to Douglas the Ancient Egyptians mummified animals for three main reasons. A few animals were beloved pets mummified by their owners, perhaps in the hope that they could join them in the next life. Some animals were mummified and placed in tombs to provide a food source for the deceased in the next life. However, the majority of animals were mummified for religious reasons unconnected with human burial.<sup>9</sup> Some scholars dispute the identification of votive animal mummies and suggest that these animals were the image of the god and were buried in sacred cemeteries<sup>10</sup>. Most the materials and methods which used in animal's mummification were identified by a group of scientists from the University of Manchester, they performed a CT scan of a group of stuffed animals, including three crocodiles, and they found that the method of embalming the animal was very close to the method of human embalming in ancient Egypt.<sup>11</sup>

The analysis of animal mummy bundles in the Ancient Egyptian Animal according to some researches suggested that in some instances was acting as humane mummification.<sup>12</sup>

Ikram explained the Mummification methods in ancient Egypt saying that; it was varied, but perhaps the most colorful was saved for large mammals. Wherever its internal organs might have been dissolved by a cedar oil enema that was introduced into the body and the hole then plugged up. Then the animal was buried in natron for at least 40 days and, once dries, flushed of the cedar oil by pressing the dissolved internal organs out of the anus, which were then wrapped in the usual manner<sup>13</sup>. Vast numbers of votive mummies were produced in Egypt during the Late Pharaonic, Ptolemaic, and Roman periods. Although millions remain in situ, many were removed and have ultimately entered museum collections around the world<sup>14</sup>. But the cache of crocodile at Hamra Dom is different, it does not date to late Pharaonic or Ptolemaic periods, and it is not date also to Roman period. So there is a question; is the cult of sobek and crocodiles mummification was known in old king dom; where is the time of this cemetery?

### **The Cult of the Crocodile:**

Sobek; the crocodile god, he was venerated from at least old kingdom times, and while the name of the God means simply "crocodile" he was regarded as a powerful deity with several important associations<sup>15</sup>.

As a crocodile god, Sobek possessed many of the qualities and behavior of the living reptile such as ‘Sharp of Teeth’. He was feared for his voracious appetite but also venerated for his fertility and association with the annual Nile flood upon which Egyptian agriculture was dependent<sup>16</sup>. Sobek often depicted as a crocodile-headed human figure. His principal places of worship were the Fayum and Kom Ombo, Bierbrierier regarded that He was especially popular during the late Middle Kingdom and early Second Intermediate Period, when he is often equated with Re as the god Sobek-Re<sup>17</sup>. Spencer argued the role of Sobek in the ancient Egyptian religion saying; Sobek was worshipped in a variety of forms throughout Egypt, The ancient Egyptians feared and respected the Nile crocodile in equal measure – a large, dangerous, unpredictable man-eating predator that inhabited the riverbanks and marshes<sup>18</sup>.

The ancient Egyptians were believed that; the Nile comes into existence from the sweat of Sobek and one tale states that he laid his eggs on the bank of the river initiating the creation process. This explains Sobek’s link to the rebirth of the deceased into the afterlife: he became the symbol of fertility, rebirth and strength of the Pharaoh. The crocodile is regarded as a symbol of fertility and also strength. The ancient Egyptians seem to have regarded the crocodile as a river god and there are vestiges of this belief today<sup>19</sup>.

**Cult centers of the crocodile:**

Crocodile worship was distinctive in many places in Egypt as Fayum and Kom Ombo<sup>20</sup>, Fayum show that crocodile worship was peculiar as at Kom Ombo (Upper Egypt). The crocodile there was regarded as a symbol of fertility and also strength.<sup>21</sup> Fayum was a fertile depression south of Memphis where a large lake was located during the Pharaonic Period. The area was developed during the course of Dynasty 12, several of the rulers were buried either in the Fayum at Hawara or nearby at Lahun. The principal god of the region was the crocodile god Sobek<sup>22</sup>.

**Hamra Dom cemetery:**

From power to weakness is the act of civilization, the late Old Kingdom in Egypt considers feebleness time, witnessed a gradual breakdown of the central government headquartered in Memphis and a permanent increase in the power of ministers. One reflection of this transfer of power is the large rock-cut tombs constructed near the regional centers for the local authorities, who no longer felt compelled to be interred in the Memphite necropolis near the funerary complexes of their kings. Provincial cemeteries for late Old Kingdom local officials are numerous in Middle and Upper Egypt; notable examples include those at Denderah, Sheikh Said, Deir el-Gebrawi, Deshasheh,

and Meir. The cemetery at Hamra Dom at Qina, also called El-Qasr wa es-Saiyad, it's cemetery still introduce many surprises even today<sup>23</sup>. The name Qena is derived from the ancient Egyptian word Incubated "referring to the pleat of the Nile at Qena, which embraces her arms the Nile, and thus means Qena embracing the Nile."<sup>24</sup> The rock-cut tombs at Gebel el-tarif, near the modern village of El-Qasr and El-Saiyad, and Hamra Dom northeast of Hiw, on the right bank of the Nile in the 7<sup>th</sup> upper Egyptian Nome, date to the end of old kingdom<sup>25</sup>. According to historical sources, the rock tombs were carved in the interior of the mountain in the era of the ancient state, especially during the reign of King Pepi II of the 6th Dynasty Pharaonic kings. It is one kilometer away from the site of the new discoveries of the crocodile cache in Mount Tariff<sup>26</sup>. The site is regarded as old kingdom cemetery, region of the 6 dynasty<sup>27</sup>.

### **The Cache of crocodiles at Hamra Dom:**

It is known that Crocodile a raised in a lake in the same place of its cemetery, but; where is the lake of crocodile in El-tariff Mountain? Today there is no lake, so where these crocodiles were growing up? The geography professor explained that the finding of a crocodile or Sobek in the Mount Taraf area necessarily necessitated a crocodile environment, explaining that Sobek was working in two wetlands and found two cemeteries, Fayoum, where Lake Maurice Qaroun, Kom Ombo where the Kom Ombo



basin is also a watery environment. Ibrahim said; The existence of crocodiles in the cache of Al-Tariff indicates that the existence of an ancient water environment in the region is certain, likely Lake Nile merged with the Nile by geographical changes throughout the ages, that was about four thousand years ago, or lived crocodiles in the course of the Nile itself that The Nile crocodile lived there, before the Aswan reservoir and the High Dam, and the crocodiles were then detained in Lake Nasser<sup>28</sup>. Mohamed Hamed, the director of Supreme Council of Antiquities in Egypt, Qena, said that; the area may have contained in the Pharaonic time an ancient lake where crocodiles lived, which symbolizes the god «Sobek» or at the Pharaohs, which explains The presence of crocodile fossils in Mount El Tariff, especially that the region has undergone geographical changes through different ages, and the Director of Antiquities that a team of archaeologists are studying the matter to reach clear results on the existence of the lake<sup>29</sup>. Ayman Hindi director of the Qena area, said: This area in ancient Egypt was the seventh province, the Nome of Bat, were buried here, the center of the cemetery. This contained tombs and possible tombs extending over meter along El- Tariff Mountain. The inscribed tombs dated to the reign of Pepi II and slightly later<sup>30</sup>. The details of the discovery were still a mystery. The procedures were limited to transporting crocodiles from the cemetery, which was certainly discovered by the thieves of the antiquities, which

is not new, so they stole what could be sold and left the crocodiles stuffed. The crocodile mummies were of various sizes, though most were quite small, all crocodile mummies were rolled in linen, among them there was a big one inside it were many small ones<sup>31</sup>. At the beginning of Hamra Dom's discovery, strange objects wrapped in ancient cloth were reported to be found in a deep hole in the mountain overlooking the village of Hamra Dom near an area known as 'Ezbet al-Boussa', an area where thieves are hunting for antiquities. Which is talking about the gold statues in the belly of the mountain salted her mafia saliva effects in the various categories of thieves and evangelists and contractors specialized only in archaeological excavations, and it was surprising that foreign objects are Nile crocodiles were the ancient Egyptians sanctify it as an embodiment of the god «Sobek», and surprisingly this is the first A statement refers to this in this Region<sup>32</sup>.

### **Conclusion:**

It is possible to connect between the place of the Cache in the cemetery, and the role of the crocodile "God Sobek", which helps the sun in its journey in the Lower World or helps the deceased in the process of rebirth. We can link between the rebirth in the other world and the models of boats which take the shape of the crocodile in ancient Egypt, and between the crocodile caches found in several cemeteries, Sobek was the

water master and his role in protection; it carries the deceased in his journey in the other world. It is possible to link, the existence of the cache and the presence of a temple of God Sobek in this place. Perhaps the shirring of Qina was a suitable environment for breeding the crocodile in ancient Egypt. The crocodile's cemetery at Hamra Dom was one of the most important evidence of the worship and mummification of crocodiles at the end of the Old Kingdom .The mummification of crocodiles in ancient Egypt has partly followed the same tradition of human's mummification. Crocodiles have been associated since predynastic times with the other world; prove it through their appearance associated with the boat in the art of this period.

### Plates and figures



(Fig: 1)–Crocodile tomb at HK cemetery



(Fig: 2)– Reconstructed of crocodile bones – HK cemetery

Friedman, R., In a Corner at HK6 — At Last, in: Nekhen News, vol.25, 2013, p.16.



(Fig: 3)– Crocodile's mummies from Kom Ombo Crocodile museum

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kom\\_Ombo\\_Krokodilmuseum\\_03.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kom_Ombo_Krokodilmuseum_03.jpg)

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