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New Insights into the Ornamentation of Serpent in Ancient and Islamic Egypt: Symbolism, Continuity, and Transformation

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Abstract

This study examines the complex evolution of serpent ornamentation in Egypt from the Predynastic period through the Islamic era, revealing symbolic continuity and transformation patterns across millennia. Through comparative analysis of archaeological artifacts, artistic representations, and textual sources, this research identifies how serpent symbolism maintained certain core functions while adapting to profound religious and cultural changes. In Ancient Egypt, serpents embodied a multivalent symbolism—representing divine protection through the uraeus, cosmic chaos through Apophis, healing through various deities, and regeneration through shedding skin. The transition to Islamic Egypt witnessed significant recontextualization of these motifs, with serpents appearing in religious narratives as tempters, medical contexts as healing symbols, and architectural settings as protective devices. Three detailed case studies demonstrate how specific serpent motifs evolved across these periods, revealing mechanisms of cultural transmission, including artistic workshops, textual traditions, and unconscious symbolic inheritance. This study contributes to understanding how ancient symbols persist through cultural transitions, adapting to new religious frameworks while maintaining core symbolic functions. The findings suggest that serpent ornamentation in Egypt represents artistic continuity and a complex negotiation between inherited symbolic language and new cultural imperatives, offering insights into broader cultural adaptation processes and symbolic transformation throughout human history.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Study Problem

While serpent symbolism in Ancient Egypt has been widely studied, its evolution into the Islamic period remains underexplored. Existing research often isolates these eras, overlooking long-term continuity and transformation. This study fills that gap by tracing the adaptation of serpent motifs across historical, religious, and artistic contexts using integrated archaeological, artistic, and textual analysis.

1.2. Previous Studies

1.2.1. Previous Research on Ancient Egyptian Serpent Symbolism

The study of serpent symbolism in Ancient Egypt has evolved significantly since the 19th Century. Early scholars like Wallis Budge (1904) and Wainwright (1934) highlighted the prevalence of serpents in religious contexts, emphasizing their dual nature as both protectors and chaotic threats.

In the mid-20th Century, research became more systematic. Johnson's (1990) study of the cobra goddess traced the evolution of the uraeus symbol from the predynastic period. Kákosy (1982) examined the links between serpent deities and water symbolism related to the Nile, while Te Velde (1977) analyzed Seth and Apophis as representations of cosmic disorder.

Archaeological discoveries, including Petrie's (1972) amulets catalog, showcased serpents' protective role. Hornung's (1999) work on the afterlife illuminated serpents' roles as guardians and threats, while Ritner's (1993) research on magic demonstrated their function in spells and rituals.

Recent scholarship has introduced interdisciplinary perspectives. Pinch (2002) placed serpent deities within a broader mythological context, while Szpakowska (2009) explored their ambivalent nature. Teeter (2011) connected serpent imagery to lived religious practices. Art historians like Robins (1997) and Wilkinson (1994) analyzed stylistic developments and symbolic functions in serpent representations.

Despite this wealth of research, certain areas remain underexplored, such as regional variations in serpent imagery, the differences between official and popular religious practices, and the transmission mechanisms of serpent symbolism across dynastic transitions.

1.2.2. Studies on Islamic Egyptian Art and Symbolism

Research on Islamic Egyptian art has diverged from Egyptology, using different methods and theories. Early studies, like Creswell's (1932-40) on Islamic architecture, focused on formal traits and stylistic changes rather than symbolic meanings. While they noted serpentine motifs in architecture, they often overlooked their potential symbolic significance.

During the mid-20th Century, there was a growing emphasis on the connection between pre-Islamic and Islamic artistic traditions. Ettinghausen (1984) compiled essays on Islamic art and archaeology, featuring several studies that explored similarities in ornamental designs without specifically addressing serpent imagery. Grabar's (1987) pivotal work on the origins of Islamic art provided theoretical frameworks for comprehending how pre-Islamic symbols were incorporated into Islamic contexts, highlighting the processes of appropriation and transformation.

Recent studies have increasingly emphasized the importance of animal symbolism in Islamic Egyptian art. Contadini (1998) documented the enduring use of animal imagery, particularly serpents, in Fatimid art, especially within secular contexts that imposed fewer restrictions on figurative representation. Similarly, Baer

(1998) explored the formal characteristics of serpent designs in architectural ornamentation, linking them to broader trends in Islamic decorative arts.

The intersection of Islamic medical traditions and serpent symbolism is notable. Pormann and Savage-Smith (2007) highlighted the link between serpents and healing in medieval Islamic medicine, especially in hospitals and manuscripts. Ragab (2015) further explored how serpent imagery functioned in medical institutions, maintaining ancient healing associations while adapting to Islamic culture.

Islamic manuscript illumination is vital for understanding serpent symbolism. Studies of Quranic and scientific texts reveal how serpent imagery was used, especially in the Adam and Eve narrative and in zoological and medical works. Blair and Bloom's (1994) overview of Islamic art from 1250-1800 highlights numerous serpent motifs in manuscript illustrations, demonstrating their enduring presence in Islamic art.

Despite important contributions, gaps persist in understanding serpent symbolism in Islamic Egyptian contexts. The evolution of serpent motifs from Late Antique/Coptic to early Islamic art needs further examination, as does the link between textual references and visual representations in Islamic literature. Moreover, comparative analyses between pre-Islamic and Islamic contexts are notably lacking.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Serpent Ornamentation in Ancient Egypt

2.1.1. Origins and Early Development

Serpent imagery in Egyptian culture dates back to the Predynastic period (circa 5000-3100 BC), and it is found on pottery and ceremonial objects. Early representations reflect the duality of serpent symbolism, linked to protective deities and cosmic forces during the Naqada I and II periods (circa 4000-3500 BC). The Narmer Palette (circa 3100 BC), symbolizing the unification of Upper and Lower Egypt, features mythical beasts with serpent necks, indicating a connection to royal power (Wilkinson, 1999).

In the Early Dynastic period (circa 3100-2686 BC), the uraeus emerged as a royal authority and divine protection symbol. Wadjet, a deity of Lower Egypt, became a protector of the royal family after unification (Johnson, 1990). By the Old Kingdom (circa 2686-2181 BC), the uraeus was standard in royal regalia. The Pyramid Texts (circa 2400-2300 BC) referenced serpents in protective and threatening roles, showcasing the complexity of serpent symbolism (Faulkner, 1969).

2.1.2. Major Serpent Deities and Their Iconography

Ancient Egyptian religion included several serpent deities with unique symbols and associations. Wadjet, the cobra goddess of Lower Egypt, was often depicted as a rearing cobra or a woman and served as a protector of the king, primarily shown as the uraeus on royal crowns. Her iconography remained consistent from the Early Dynastic to the Late Period, becoming more elaborate over time (Johnson, 1990).

Apophis (Apep), the chaotic serpent, represented the opposite of cosmic order (ma'at). Feared rather than worshipped, Apophis was depicted as a massive serpent being defeated in funerary texts and temple scenes, illustrating the struggle against him during the sun god's nightly journey (Hornung, 1999). Mehen, another protective serpent and coiler of the sun god Ra appears in funerary texts from the Old Kingdom onward. It embodies protective encirclement around the king during his journey through the afterlife (Hornung, 1999).

Renenutet, the cobra goddess of harvest and nourishment, became prominent during the Middle Kingdom. She is often shown as a cobra or a woman with a cobra's head, highlighting her significance in agricultural contexts (Lesko, 1999). Meretseger, known as "She Who Loves Silence," was the serpent goddess of the Theban necropolis. She was revered by artisans who sought her protection in their work on royal tombs (Pinch, 2002).

2.1.3. Symbolic Functions and Meanings

Serpent symbolism in Ancient Egypt encompassed various meanings throughout Egyptian history, primarily focusing on protection, cosmic order, rebirth, healing, and wisdom. The uraeus cobra, representing divine protection and power, was commonly found in royal contexts, such as crowns and jewelry (Wilkinson, 2003). Serpents symbolize the dichotomy between order and chaos, with the controlled serpent opposing the chaotic Apophis. This theme of order triumphing over chaos is prominent in religious texts from the Old Kingdom to the Ptolemaic period (Hornung, 1982).

Additionally, serpents' ability to shed their skin made them natural symbols of rebirth, seen in funerary contexts and texts like the Coffin Texts and Book of the Dead, which feature spells for transformation into serpent forms (Faulkner, 1978). In medicine, serpents were associated with healing. Medical papyri reveal their dual role as a source of venom and a healer, and serpent-shaped tools and protective amulets are found in archaeological evidence (Nunn, 1996). Lastly, serpents symbolized wisdom, appearing in mythological narratives and hieroglyphs. They often guarded Temple Libraries and Houses of Life, linking them to sacred knowledge (Quirke, 2015).

2.1.4. Artistic Representations and Techniques

Serpent imagery in Ancient Egyptian art took various forms and used diverse techniques. Two-dimensional representations on papyrus and tomb walls followed established conventions, with serpents depicted in profile and with recognizable features, like cobras with their distinct hoods. The level of detail varied, ranging from naturalistic to stylized (Robins, 1997).

Three-dimensional representations included sculptures, amulets, and architectural elements. Royal statues often incorporated the uraeus cobra, while more miniature serpent figures were crafted in jewelry using materials like gold and semi-precious stones (Andrews, 1994). Materials for serpent imagery varied, with stone carving allowing for detailed reliefs, while metalworking techniques, such as lost wax casting, created intricate forms. Faience was popular for amulets and small figurines, often in blue-green colors (Nicholson & Peltenburg, 2000).

Stylistic evolution revealed continuity and innovation. Old Kingdom serpents were formal and straightforward, while the Middle Kingdom displayed greater naturalism. New Kingdom representations, especially in the Amarna period, showed dynamic movement, and Late Period examples featured elaborate details, reflecting syncretic religious developments (Russmann, 2001).

Regional variations were subtle but detectable, with Lower Egypt emphasizing cobras and Upper Egypt focusing on vultures until the unification of symbolic systems. Local serpent cults at sites like Dendera and Edfu developed unique iconographic traditions, showcasing adaptations within broader symbolic frameworks (Baines, 2007).

2.2. Serpent Ornamentation in Ancient Egypt

During the Greco-Roman period (332 BC - 395 AD), Egyptian serpent symbolism continued to evolve, often blending with Hellenistic and Roman traditions. The uraeus, for instance, remained a significant royal and divine emblem, appearing on the crowns of Ptolemaic pharaohs and Roman emperors in Egypt, signifying continuity of power and protection. Asclepius, the Greek god of medicine, often depicted with a serpent-entwined staff, found resonance in Egypt, further reinforcing the serpent's association with healing. This period saw a syncretism of beliefs, where Egyptian deities like Isis and Serapis were sometimes depicted with serpentine attributes, integrating their roles within a broader Mediterranean religious landscape. The Ouroboros, an ancient symbol of a serpent eating its own tail, representing cycles of renewal and eternity, gained prominence in Gnostic and alchemical texts during this time, reflecting philosophical and mystical interpretations of serpent symbolism.

With the advent of Christianity in Egypt, the Coptic period (c. 300 AD - 640 AD) brought a significant recontextualization of serpent imagery. While the serpent in Christian theology often symbolized evil and temptation (as in the Garden of Eden narrative), it also retained positive associations, such as the bronze serpent of Moses, which offered healing and salvation. Coptic art, while largely aniconic in religious contexts, occasionally featured stylized serpentine motifs in decorative elements, often stripped of their pagan connotations or reinterpreted within a Christian framework. This period represents a crucial bridge, where ancient Egyptian symbolic forms were either consciously rejected, subtly transformed, or unconsciously carried forward, laying the groundwork for their eventual re-emergence or reinterpretation in the Islamic era. The transition was not abrupt but a gradual process of re-evaluation and adaptation, influenced by changing religious doctrines and artistic conventions.

2.3. Serpent Ornamentation in Islamic Egypt

2.3.1. Historical Context of Transition

The transition from Ancient Egyptian to Islamic serpent symbolism occurred through several historical phases. The Late Antique and Coptic period (4th-7th centuries AD) marked a crucial transition, where Christian interpretations began to reshape serpent symbolism influenced by Biblical narratives. Coptic art retained elements of Egyptian representation but recontextualized their meanings, depicting serpents in both negative (associated with Satan) and positive (as in the bronze serpent of Moses) contexts (Badawy, 1978).

In the early Islamic period (7th-9th centuries AD), serpent imagery faced negotiation between Islamic attitudes toward figural representation and traditional Egyptian visual culture. While serpent motifs receded from religious contexts, they persisted in secular and medical domains, though archaeological evidence is limited (Contadini, 1998).

The Fatimid period (10th-12th centuries AD) saw a revival of figural representation. Serpent motifs thrived in secular decorative arts, especially in manuscripts related to esoteric knowledge and the sciences, maintaining connections to earlier traditions (Bloom, 2007). During the Mamluk period (13th-16th centuries AD), religious conservatism led to more stylized architectural serpent motifs but greater naturalism in scientific contexts. Illustrated manuscripts further integrated detailed serpent imagery into decorative programs (Behrens-Abouseif, 1989). The Ottoman period (16th-17th centuries AD) brought new influences as Turkish and

Egyptian artistic traditions merged, resulting in stylized serpent motifs across various contexts, including medical and architectural decorations (Hattstein & Delius, 2000).

2.3.2. Religious Context and Limitations

Several factors, including Quranic references, hadith interpretations, and theological positions on art, shaped Islamic attitudes toward serpent imagery. The Quran mentions serpents in the context of Moses and the Garden of Eden, allowing for some depiction in illustrative contexts (Schimmel, 1992).

Hadith literature features many references to snakes, detailing which types can be killed, their dream associations, and links to Jinn and Shaitan. This created ambivalence in Islamic culture, viewing serpents as potentially dangerous but not inherently evil, allowing for varied interpretations of serpent imagery (El Weshahy & Omar, 2020).

Theological positions on figural art in Islam differed over time and place, restricting representation, particularly in religious contexts. However, serpent imagery in scientific and medical works faced fewer restrictions. This distinction between prohibited and permitted representations led to strategies like stylization, abstraction, and decorative motifs referencing serpents without explicit representation (Grabar, 1987; Baer, 1998).

2.3.3. Functional Contexts and Applications

Serpent ornamentation in Islamic Egypt appeared in various contexts, primarily in architectural design, where serpentine motifs adorned religious and secular buildings. While explicit imagery was rare in mosques, abstract forms were common in carved stucco and woodwork. More naturalistic representations were found on secular structures linked to healing and protection. Evidence from the Fatimid, Mamluk, and Ottoman sites in Cairo shows that serpentine designs were stylized to fit Islamic aesthetics (Hillenbrand, 1999).

In medical and scientific illustrations, particularly in Islamic manuscripts, detailed serpent images thrived for identification and study within pharmacopeias and surgical texts, continuing the ancient link between serpents and medicine. Archaeological findings from bimaristans in Cairo include elements featuring serpent imagery, reflecting this enduring association (Pormann & Savage-Smith, 2007).

Manuscript illumination, including Quranic texts, occasionally featured stylized serpent motifs. Illustrated literary works, like animal fables, depicted them more naturally, while cosmological manuscripts incorporated serpents about celestial and zodiacal themes (Contadini, 1998). Textiles from the Fatimid period included recognizable serpents, later evolving toward abstract designs within geometric patterns. This medium allowed serpent imagery to enter daily life through clothing and ceremonial fabrics (Mackie, 2015). Serpentine forms appeared on various objects in metalwork and ceramics, blending decorative elements with functional designs in domestic and courtly contexts. This allowed for more freedom in representation while retaining traditional symbolism (Watson, 2004).

2.3.4. Symbolic Transformations

The transition from Ancient Egyptian to Islamic contexts saw significant changes in serpent symbolism. Once complex in Egyptian mythology, serpent deities transformed into decorative motifs in Islamic culture, reflecting Islam's monotheistic framework that discouraged the worship of animal deities. Instead, these serpents were recontextualized as natural or symbolic elements, maintaining ties to earlier traditions (Grabar, 1987).

Healing associations related to serpents, linked to deities like Meretseger, persisted into Islamic medical traditions. Islamic hospitals incorporated serpent

imagery in decorations and medical tools, acknowledging the ancient connection while framing it in an Islamic context. Medical manuscripts continued using serpent illustrations for identification and symbolism (Ragab, 2015).

Protective uses of serpents also showed continuity, as serpent imagery transitioned from ancient protective amulets to Islamic talismans, even though Islamic teachings discouraged such practices. This imagery remained in various personal and architectural objects, illustrating an adaptation to Islamic culture without losing its protective function (El Weshahy & Omar, 2020). In Islamic art, serpent forms became increasingly abstract, aligning with the emphasis on geometric patterns and calligraphy. This abstraction-maintained connections to serpentine movements without explicit representation, allowing serpent imagery to persist within Islamic decorative systems (Baer, 1998).

Additionally, narrative illustrations incorporated serpents influenced by Jewish and Christian traditions, particularly in the Adam and Eve story. While the Quran does not explicitly mention a serpent as the tempter, illustrated manuscripts often depicted one, emphasizing negative associations with temptation and obedience. This narrative adaptation showcased continuity with earlier representations while aligning with Islamic perspectives (Milstein, 1999).

3. Case Studies

3.1. Case Study 1: The Uraeus Symbol

3.1.1. Ancient Egyptian Origins and Royal Context

The uraeus, a rearing cobra symbolizing royalty, adorned the brows of pharaohs in Ancient Egypt and has roots dating back to the Early Dynastic Period (c. 3100-2686 BC). Notably featured on Tutankhamun's gold funerary mask, it represents the goddess Wadjet and signifies the protection of Lower and Upper Egypt (Johnson, 1990).

(Fig. 1) Gold Uraeus Ornament (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Rogers Fund, 1950 (50.198.3))

During the Late Period–Ptolemaic Period (ca. 664–30 BC), the uraeus remained a powerful emblem of royal authority, showcasing the pharaoh's divine right to rule and his connection with the gods. Positioned prominently on the king's brow, it illustrated the "Eye of Ra," capable of defending against enemies, as reflected in the Pyramid Texts describing it as "the flame that hisses" (Faulkner, 1969). The uraeus demonstrated meticulous attention to detail in its design. Its consistent representation throughout Egyptian history highlights its significant role in royal iconography (Andrews, 1994).

3.1.2. Coptic Transitional Forms

The Coptic period (4th-7th centuries CE) saw significant changes in the uraeus symbol as Egypt shifted from polytheism to Christianity. Although explicit royal imagery declined with the end of native kingship, serpent motifs persisted in Coptic textiles, manuscripts, and architecture, maintaining links to the ancient uraeus while adapting to new contexts. Coptic textiles from the 4th-6th centuries CE offer valuable insights into cultural transition, featuring stylized serpent forms that echo the uraeus yet lack royal symbolism. These adaptations retained specific characteristics—such as the rearing posture and sinuous body—while fitting into Christian visual culture. Their continued presence indicates an unconscious visual inheritance rather than a conscious symbolic link (Thomas, 2007).

Coptic manuscript illumination sometimes featured serpents, especially in decorative borders and secular contexts. While Christian views linked serpents to Satan and temptation, serpent motifs continued in non-narrative uses. These designs occasionally retained elements of the uraeus tradition, serving as decorative symbols within the Christian context (Badawy, 1978).

3.1.3. Islamic Adaptations in Architectural Contexts

The Islamic period transformed uraeus-derived serpent imagery, especially in architecture. While the explicit representation of the uraeus as a royal symbol faded, serpentine forms appeared in architectural decoration during the Fatimid (10th-12th centuries CE) and Mamluk (13th-16th centuries CE) periods. In Fatimid Cairo, carved wooden beams and panels featured undulating serpentine motifs reminiscent of the uraeus cobra, which evolved from a royal symbol to an abstract decorative element. These forms in doorways and window frames may have continued a protective function, albeit without explicit theological ties (Bloom, 2007).

The Mamluk period further developed these designs, incorporating serpentine elements into intricate geometric and vegetal patterns. Stone and stucco reliefs from Mamluk buildings-maintained connections to serpent imagery while aligning with Islamic aesthetic principles. This integration into muqarnas and other features illustrates how the motif was absorbed into Islamic decorative language (Behrens-Abouseif, 1989).

3.1.4. Analysis of Transformation and Continuity

The evolution of the uraeus symbol from Ancient Egyptian to Islamic contexts showcases significant patterns of symbolic transformation. Its distinctive shape retained recognizable continuity across diverse cultures, highlighting the enduring power of visual memory despite changes in meaning. The function of the uraeus shifted from an explicit royal emblem to a more decorative and abstract form, reflecting broader cultural changes, such as the decline of native kingship and the rise of monotheism, while still hinting at protective associations.

Additionally, the representation contexts narrowed from prominent royal depictions to more peripheral decorative uses, indicating evolving attitudes toward representation and symbolism. The material execution of the symbol also changed, transitioning from precious metals and stones in Ancient Egypt to carved wood and stucco in Islamic contexts. This illustrates how the uraeus has persevered through cultural shifts, transforming in meaning and function while remaining an enduring visual form.

3.2. Case Study 2: Serpents in Healing Contexts

3.2.1. Ancient Egyptian Medical Papyri and Healing Deities

In Ancient Egypt, serpents had a dual role in medicine, serving as sources of harm and healing. This complexity is reflected in medical papyri, such as the Brooklyn Snake Papyrus, which details snake species, bites, treatments, and magical spells indicative of the integrated healing practices of the time (Sauneron, 1989). Serpent deities like Meretseger were believed to inflict and cure ailments, especially those affecting the eyes. Votive stelae from Deir el-Medina show workers praying to her, highlighting the duality of serpents as both sources of affliction and healing (Pinch, 2002).

Archaeological evidence, including serpent-shaped wands, medicinal vessels, and protective amulets, illustrates how serpent imagery manifested in healing practices (Nunn, 1996). A faience cane from the Ptolemaic-Roman Period also displays Isis-Hathor in a serpent form, emphasizing the connection between serpents and healing rituals. The snake's ability to shed its skin symbolized rejuvenation, linking it to healing. Funerary texts like the Book of the Dead include spells for transformation into serpents to promote rebirth, underscoring the lasting associations between serpents and regeneration in Ancient Egyptian culture (Hornung, 1999).

(Fig. 2) *Cane, Cow-headed Serpent. (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Helen Miller Gould, 1910 (17.194.2463))*

3.2.2. Transition through the Greco-Roman Period

The Greco-Roman period in Egypt (332 BC-395 CE) experienced important developments in serpent healing symbolism through cultural exchange. Greek traditions linked to Asclepius and his serpent staff merged with Egyptian practices, resulting in hybrid forms. Temples dedicated to Serapis and Asclepius prominently featured serpent imagery in healing contexts (Renberg, 2017). Terracotta figurines and amulets depicted serpents in healing, illustrating the blending of Greek and Egyptian traditions. Medical texts from this time continued associating serpents with healing while adopting Greek theories. The Asclepius cult became popular, introducing new rituals and reinforcing serpent associations (Nutton, 2013). This cultural exchange established the foundation for future serpent healing symbolism (Bailey, 2008).

3.2.3. Islamic Bimaristan Imagery

In Islamic Egypt, hospitals (bimaristans) maintained associations between serpents and healing, as seen in the Qalawun Complex in Cairo (1284-1285 CE) featured serpentine decorations linked to earlier healing imagery while adhering to

Islamic aesthetics. Archaeological findings show that this serpent imagery persisted in institutional healing despite changing religious contexts (Ragab, 2015).

Medical manuscripts from this period often included detailed serpent illustrations, particularly in toxicology and pharmacology, aiding physicians in identifying venomous species while preserving symbolic links between serpents and medicine. These illustrations blended Greco-Roman naturalism and Islamic decorative styles (Pormann & Savage-Smith, 2007).

Medical instruments and pharmacy containers from Islamic Egypt also occasionally featured serpent imagery, reinforcing ancient healing associations. Evidence includes bronze and brass tools with serpentine designs and ceramic vessels adorned with serpent motifs, illustrating the continuity of serpent symbolism in medical practices (Hamarneh, 1983).

3.2.4. Comparative Analysis of Medical Serpent Symbolism

The evolution of serpent symbolism in healing from Ancient Egyptian to Islamic periods highlights key patterns. The practical functionality of serpent imagery allowed its persistence across religious transitions, as it served practical purposes, such as identifying venomous species and marking medical implements. This practical aspect enabled the symbol to survive cultural changes, unlike more strictly religious symbolism that faced pressure to align with new theological frameworks.

Moreover, the association between serpents and healing remained strong despite shifts in theoretical perspectives, transitioning from the magical-religious paradigm of Ancient Egyptian medicine to the empirical approaches of Islamic medicine. While artistic representations evolved—from the stylized depictions of serpents in Ancient Egypt to more naturalistic representations in Islamic manuscripts—this continuity in symbolism reflects broader institutional changes. Healing transitioned from temple-based sanctuaries to professionalized bimaristans, demonstrating how serpent imagery adapted yet retained its core association with healing across distinct cultural systems.

3.3. Case Study 3: Ancient Egyptian Architectural Applications

Serpent imagery was a significant element in Ancient Egyptian architecture, symbolizing protection, royal authority, and cosmic order. The uraeus frieze, characterized by rearing cobras adorned temple walls, pylons, and gateways, creates a sacred boundary that invokes the protection of serpent deities like Wadjet (Arnold, 2003).

For instance, a faience cobra head from the New Kingdom (Dynasty 18) was part of an architectural frieze meant for temples or palaces, serving decorative and protective functions (Figure 3). Other serpent motifs included guardian serpents at doorways and serpentine column capitals, highlighting standardized iconographic features across different sites (Wilkinson, 2000). The material of these decorations varied, from monumental stone friezes at major temples to painted wooden motifs and colorful faience tiles, showcasing adaptability to different contexts (Nicholson & Shaw, 2000).

These serpent elements symbolized protection and royal authority, particularly in palace contexts that echoed the uraeus on crowns. Their consistent presence across diverse political and religious landscapes illustrates their enduring significance (Baines, 1985).

(Fig. 3) *Cobra head for architectural frieze. (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Funds from various donors, 1886 (86.1.59))*

3.3.1. Coptic Architectural Adaptations

The Coptic period saw significant changes in architectural serpent ornamentation as Egypt shifted to Christianity. While explicit serpent imagery decreased in religious architecture, certain serpentine formal elements remained in modified forms. Archaeological evidence from Coptic churches shows a decline in overt ornamentation, yet features like undulating linear patterns still evoke ancient serpent friezes, particularly in protective contexts such as cornices and doorways. This indicates the adaptation of ancient motifs to fit Christian themes (Grossmann, 2002).

Coptic architecture occasionally included serpentine elements in capitals and lintels, although explicit representations became rare. The persistence of sinuous lines and scale-like patterns reflects the integration of these motifs into Christian visual culture through abstraction (Badawy, 1978).

The material execution of Coptic ornamentation marked both continuity and change; while ancient serpent friezes were often in stone, Coptic designs increasingly used carved wood, stucco, and textiles, highlighting a focus on interior decoration over monumental exteriors (Thomas, 2000).

3.3.2. Islamic Architectural Developments

Islamic architecture in Egypt developed unique ornamental patterns that retained connections to ancient serpent designs while aligning with Islamic aesthetic principles. Although explicit serpent representation declined in religious contexts, the formal properties of serpent ornamentation persisted in abstract geometric and vegetal patterns, incorporating elements like undulating lines and spirals. Often found in protective contexts like cornices and doorways, these patterns reflect ancient associations even in new religious settings (Bloom, 2007).

Muqarnas elements occasionally featured serpentine forms within intricate three-dimensional compositions, mainly in transitional areas like domes, while maintaining some connection to ancient serpent friezes. This boundary zone placement suggests functional and formal continuity (Behrens-Abouseif, 1989).

The ornamentation in Islamic architecture displayed innovation and continuity, with stone carving linked to ancient techniques, while new methods like stucco relief and glazed tile work adapted serpentine patterns to create distinctive styles (Bloom & Blair, 2009). Islamic architecture in Egypt developed distinctive approaches to

ornamental patterns that maintained certain connections to ancient serpent ornamentation while conforming to Islamic aesthetic and theological principles. While explicit serpent representation declined significantly in religious architectural contexts, specific formal properties of serpent ornamentation persisted in abstract decorative patterns. Archaeological evidence from mosques, madrasas, and other Islamic buildings demonstrates how serpentine forms were integrated into Islamic architectural vocabulary.

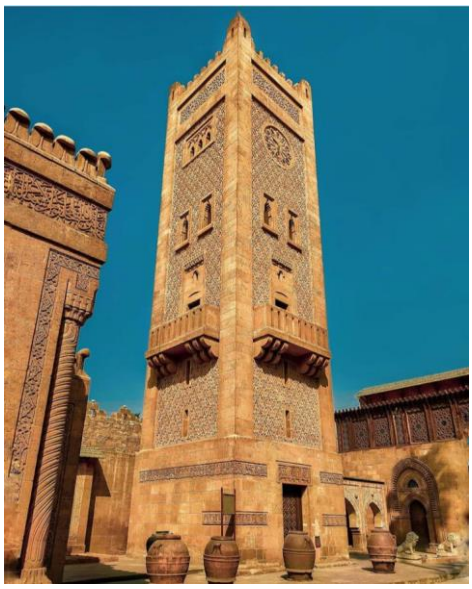
Geometric and vegetal patterns in Islamic architectural decoration sometimes incorporated serpentine elements—undulating lines, spiral forms, interlaced bands—that maintained formal connections to ancient serpent ornamentation. These abstract patterns appeared in contexts traditionally associated with protective serpent imagery—cornices, doorways, mihrabs—suggesting the persistence of ancient protective associations in new religious contexts. The thorough abstraction of these elements reflects Islamic theological concerns about figurative representation while demonstrating the adaptability of serpentine forms to geometric abstraction (Bloom, 2007).

In Islamic architecture, muqarnas (stalactite vaulting) elements sometimes featured serpentine forms integrated into complex three-dimensional compositions. These architectural elements, which appeared primarily in transitional zones like domes and cornices, maintained certain formal connections to ancient serpent friezes while thoroughly transforming into abstract architectural vocabulary. The placement of these elements in boundary zones echoes the traditional placement of protective serpent friezes, suggesting functional and formal continuity (Behrens-Abouseif, 1989).

The material execution of Islamic architectural ornamentation showed both innovation and continuity. While stone carving-maintained connections to ancient traditions, new techniques like stucco relief, glazed tile work, and inlaid marble created distinctive approaches to serpentine patterning. This material innovation demonstrates how ancient formal properties could be adapted to new technical and aesthetic frameworks, creating distinctive stylistic syntheses (Bloom & Blair, 2009).

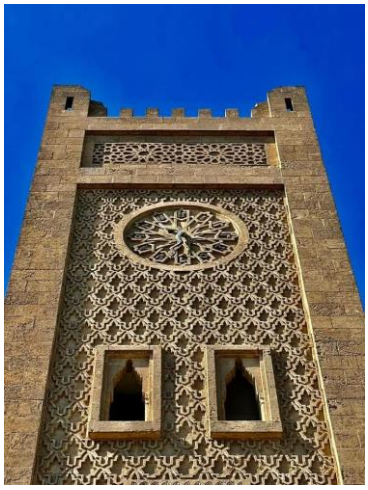
3.3.3. Serpent Ornamentation in a Modern Egyptian Prince Mohamed Ali Palace's Clock Tower/Minaret

A pertinent case study is a modern clock tower/minaret in Prince Mohamed Ali Palace's, Giza, Egypt (Figures 4-6), whose ornamentation integrates traditional Islamic geometric patterns with a unique application of serpent imagery.



(Fig. 4) *Side view of Prince Mohamed Ali palace's clock tower/minaret. (credited to authors)*

The exterior facades of this architectural unit are distinctively adorned with star-shaped plates, executed in bas-relief within rectangular stone friezes. As described in architectural documentation, one such frieze features an arrangement of three complete eight-pointed star patterns interspersed with two twin twelve-pointed star patterns, showcasing the intricate geometric designs characteristic of Islamic art (Bloom, 2007).



(Fig. 5) *Front view of Prince Mohamed Ali palace's clock tower/minaret. (credited to authors)*

Of particular relevance to the study of serpent ornamentation is the design of the clock face prominently displayed on the upper sections of the tower's north and south facades (Figures 5-6). The visual evidence clearly shows an analog clock face. This clock face is itself a remarkable piece of ornamentation, designed as a large, twelve-pointed star-shaped plate or rosette, carved in bas-relief against a recessed background. The twelve points of the star correspond to the hours, marked by stylized numerals within twelve distinct segments or lobes arranged circumferentially (Figure 6).

At the very center of this elaborate clock face, the primary clock hand is fashioned in the unmistakable form of a decorative serpent. This serpent-hand rotates around the dial, pointing to the hours marked within the twelve lobes. The choice to represent the clock hand as a serpent is a striking departure from typical clock design and introduces a layer of complex symbolism. While Islamic art generally moved towards abstraction, avoiding explicit figurative representation, particularly in religious contexts (Bloom & Blair, 2009), this modern example reintroduces the serpent form in a functional, yet highly stylized and decorative manner.

(Fig. 6) *The primary clock hand which fashioned in the unmistakable form of a decorative serpent of Prince Mohamed Ali palace's clock tower/minaret. (credited to authors)*

The serpent, historically imbued with meanings of protection, royalty, chaos, and eternity (as seen in the Uraeus and Ouroboros traditions; Wilkinson, 2000; Daneshvari, 2016), finds a new, perhaps more secularized, role here. Its presence on a clock, an instrument measuring time, might subtly evoke ancient concepts of cyclical time and eternity, themes associated with the Ouroboros serpent biting its tail (Hornung, 1999). Furthermore, its integration within the geometric star pattern, a hallmark of Islamic design often symbolizing cosmic order and the heavens, creates a fascinating juxtaposition. The serpent, often representing earthly or chthonic forces, is placed at the center of a celestial pattern, perhaps suggesting a synthesis or balance.

This contemporary application demonstrates the enduring resonance of the serpent motif in Egyptian visual culture. While its explicit religious connotations may have shifted or diminished compared to ancient times, its formal properties and symbolic potential continue to be explored and reinterpreted in modern architectural ornamentation, linking contemporary design back to a long historical lineage.

3.3.4. Comparative Analysis of Architectural Serpent Ornamentation

The evolution of architectural serpent ornamentation from Ancient Egyptian to Islamic contexts reveals key formal abstraction and functional continuity patterns. As explicit representations of serpents became less acceptable in monotheistic cultures, their forms became more abstract and integrated into ornamental frameworks. This abstraction maintained specific visual elements, such as undulating lines and spiral forms, even as the symbolism associated with serpents diminished. Architectural serpent ornamentation consistently appeared in specific functional areas, like cornices and doorways, allowing it to retain its traditional roles while adapting to new cultural contexts.

Additionally, technical and material innovations played a crucial role in the stylistic adaptation of serpentine forms. Different cultural periods employed techniques—from stone relief carving in Ancient Egypt to stucco muqarnas in Islamic architecture—that facilitated the integration of serpentine designs within evolving architectural traditions. Over time, the semantic significance of serpent imagery narrowed; what once conveyed protection and cosmic order in Ancient Egypt became primarily decorative in Islamic architecture. This case study demonstrates how formal properties and functional contexts enable symbolic persistence through cultural transitions, allowing serpentine ornamentation to adapt while retaining its architectural significance.

4. Conclusion

This study has traced the complex evolution of serpent ornamentation in Egypt from the Predynastic period through the Islamic era, revealing significant symbolic continuity and transformation patterns across millennia. We have identified how serpent symbolism maintained certain core functions while adapting to profound religious and cultural changes through comparative analysis of archaeological artifacts, artistic representations, and textual sources.

4.1. Chronological Development and Symbolic Persistence

The evolution of serpent symbolism in ancient Egypt demonstrates its adaptability and longevity. From Predynastic pottery (c. 5000-3100 BC), serpent imagery embodied protective and cosmic attributes, allowing it to evolve through different historical periods. As shown in Table 1, each era approached serpent representation uniquely while retaining core meanings. The Early Dynastic period established the protective uraeus in royal imagery, lasting nearly three millennia. The Middle Kingdom introduced agricultural aspects via the goddess Renenutet, while the New Kingdom expanded serpent imagery in funerary contexts. The Greco-Roman period blended Egyptian and Greek traditions, particularly in healing. Serpent imagery transformed significantly with the rise of Coptic Christianity and later Islam. Overt representations became less acceptable, resulting in abstract forms and functional adaptations, such as undulating patterns in Coptic architecture and serpentine elements in Islamic designs, linking to ancient motifs while embracing new beliefs.

Table (1) Chronological Evolution of Serpent Symbolism in Egypt

Period	Date Range	Key Representations	Primary Symbolic Functions
Predynastic	c. 5000-3100 BC	Serpentine forms on pottery, slate palettes, ceremonial objects	Dual nature: protective female deities and dangerous cosmic forces
Early Dynastic	c. 3100-2686 BC	Emergence of uraeus, serpent-necked beasts on Narmer Palette	Royal authority, divine protection
Old Kingdom	c. 2686-2181 BC	Standardized uraeus on royal regalia, Pyramid Texts references	Royal protection, cosmic order/chaos dichotomy
Middle Kingdom	c. 2055-1650 BC	Apophis in funerary texts, Renenutet in agricultural contexts	Chaos (Apophis), fertility/nourishment (Renenutet)
New Kingdom	c. 1550-1069 BC	Elaborate tomb depictions, Meretseger cult at Theban necropolis	Protection, regeneration, afterlife journey
Greco-Roman	332 BC-395 CE	Syncretic healing serpent imagery, Serapis and Asclepius temples	Healing, cultural syncretism
Coptic	4th-7th centuries CE	Abstract undulating patterns, serpentine architectural elements	Abstract protection, Christian recontextualization
Islamic	7th Century CE onward	Medical manuscripts, bimaristan decoration, abstract architectural patterns	Healing, abstract protection, decorative function

4.2. Core Symbolic Functions and Their Transformation

Table 2 illustrates the enduring symbolic roles of serpent imagery across various cultures, emphasizing adaptations over time. Protection has remained the primary function, evolving from the protective power of the uraeus cobra to the incorporation of serpentine architectural elements in Islamic designs. This continuity facilitated the transition of formal and symbolic aspects, even as their meanings changed.

While the cosmic order versus chaos dichotomy found in Ancient Egyptian symbolism has limited parallels in Islamic contexts, some narrative threads have endured. The connection between serpents and rebirth has diminished mainly in Islamic settings, reflecting theological differences.

Nevertheless, the association of serpents with healing and medicine has proven resilient, maintaining strong ties from Ancient Egyptian medical practices into Islamic contexts. Practical applications of serpent imagery bolster this connection. Furthermore, the links between serpents and wisdom have persisted through educational traditions, albeit with significant recontextualization.

Table (2) Core Symbolic Functions of Serpent Imagery Across Cultural Transitions

Symbolic Function	Ancient Egyptian Manifestation	Islamic Adaptation	Continuity Mechanisms
Protection	Uraeus cobra, temple friezes, amulets	Abstract architectural patterns, talismanic designs	Formal abstraction, functional placement
Cosmic Order/Chaos	Ordered serpents (divine) vs. Apophis (chaos)	Limited direct equivalence, some narrative elements	Textual traditions, unconscious inheritance
Rebirth/Regeneration	Funerary contexts, skin-shedding symbolism	Largely absent in religious contexts	Limited continuity
Healing/Medicine	Serpent deities, medical implements	Medical manuscripts, bimaristan decoration	Practical functionality, medical traditions
Wisdom/Knowledge	Association with sacred knowledge, temple libraries	Scientific manuscripts, philosophical texts	Textual transmission, educational contexts

4.3. Serpent Representations in Ancient and Islamic Egypt

The following table provides a comprehensive overview of serpent representations identified in this study, organized chronologically and highlighting their locations and symbolic meanings:

Table (3) A comprehensive overview of serpent representations identified in this study

Date	Location	Symbolism/Meaning
c. 5000-3100 BC (Predynastic Period)	Throughout Egypt (pottery, slate palettes, ceremonial objects)	Dual nature - both protective female deities and dangerous cosmic forces
c. 4000-3500 BC (Naqada I and II Periods)	Naqada region, Egypt	Protective female deities and dangerous cosmic forces
c. 3100 BC	Narmer Palette (commemorating the unification of Upper and Lower Egypt)	Association with royal power
c. 3100-2686 BC (Early Dynastic Period)	Royal iconography throughout Egypt	Royal authority and divine protection
Early Dynastic through Late Period	Lower Egypt (Wadjet, originally a local deity)	Protector of the king
c. 2686-2181 BC (Old Kingdom)	Throughout Egypt (royal regalia, statuary, relief carvings, funerary equipment)	Royal authority and divine protection
c. 2400-2300 BC	Pyramid Texts in pyramid tombs	Both protective and threatening roles
Middle Kingdom onward	Funerary texts, temple scenes, Book of the Dead, Books of the Netherworld (Apophis/Apep)	Chaos, antithesis of cosmic order (ma'at)
The Old Kingdom onward	Funerary texts, royal tombs (particularly Valley of the Kings) - Mehen	Protective encirclement
Middle Kingdom	Agricultural contexts, granaries, and domestic shrines throughout Egypt (Renenutet)	Harvest, nourishment
New Kingdom	Theban necropolis, Deir el-Medina (Meretseger)	Protection, forgiveness
Throughout Ancient Egyptian history	Temples (Karnak, Luxor, Edfu), sacred gateways,	Protection, demarcation of sacred space, expression of

	palace contexts	royal authority
332 BC-395 CE (Greco-Roman Period)	Temples dedicated to Serapis and Asclepius	Healing
4th-7th centuries CE (Coptic Period)	Coptic churches and monasteries	Abstract protective elements
Islamic period (7th Century CE onward)	Qalawun Complex in Cairo (built 1284-1285 CE), Islamic hospitals (bimaristans)	Healing
Islamic period	Medical manuscripts on toxicology and pharmacology	Medicine, healing
Islamic period	Medical tools, pharmacy containers	Healing
Islamic period	Mosques, madrasas, other Islamic buildings	Abstract protective elements, decorative patterns
Islamic period	Transitional zones like domes and cornices in Islamic architecture (muqarnas elements)	Abstract protective elements

5. Results

a. **Symbolic Duality:** Throughout Egyptian history, serpent symbolism exhibited a fundamental duality, embodying protective forces and dangerous threats. This duality offered symbolic flexibility, allowing the imagery to adapt to changing cultural contexts.

b. **Functional Persistence:** Certain core functions of serpent symbolism, particularly those associated with protection and healing, exhibited remarkable persistence during religious transitions. These functions adapted to new theological frameworks while retaining their essential associations.

c. **Abstraction as Adaptation:** As explicit representations of serpents became increasingly problematic in monotheistic contexts, formal abstraction emerged to allow serpentine elements to persist in modified forms. This adaptation helped maintain formal and functional connections while sidestepping theological conflicts.

d. **Contextual Justification:** Non-religious contexts, particularly in medicine, science, and decorative arts, have justified serpent imagery that transcends

specific religious frameworks. This phenomenon has facilitated the transmission of symbolism across various cultural boundaries.

e. **Institutional Transformation:** The institutional contexts of serpent symbolism evolved from temples to hospitals and educational settings, reflecting broader changes in the organization and authorization of symbolic systems across different cultural periods.

f. **Material Innovation:** Each cultural period developed distinct technical approaches to serpent ornamentation, ranging from stone relief carving in Ancient Egypt to stucco and glazed tile in Islamic architecture.

g. **Cultural Negotiation:** The evolution of serpent symbolism in Egypt illustrates artistic continuity and a complex negotiation between inherited symbolic language and new cultural imperatives. It offers insights into broader processes of cultural adaptation throughout human history.

This research enhances our understanding of how ancient symbols endure through cultural transitions, adapting to new religious frameworks while preserving core symbolic functions. The findings indicate that cultural transitions involve intricate processes of symbolic reinterpretation rather than mere replacement, with specific formal properties and functional associations bridging significant religious and cultural differences.

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رؤى جديدة في زخرفة الأفعى في مصر القديمة والإسلامية: الرمزية، الاستمرارية، والتحول

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الملخص

تتناول هذه الدراسة تطور زخرفة الأفعى في مصر منذ عصور ما قبل الأسرات وحتى العصر الإسلامي، كاشفة عن أنماط من الاستمرارية الرمزية والتحول عبر آلاف السنين. ومن خلال تحليل مقارن للقطع الأثرية، والتمثيلات الفنية، والمصادر النصية، تحدد الدراسة كيف حافظت رمزية الأفعى على وظائفها الجوهرية رغم التغيرات الدينية والثقافية العميقة.

في مصر القديمة، جسدت الأفعى رمزية متعددة الأوجه، فمثلت الحماية الإلهية من خلال "الحية المقدسة"، والفوضى الكونية، والشفاء بواسطة عدد من الآلهة، والتجدد عبر انسلاخ جلدها. ومع الانتقال إلى مصر الإسلامية، أعيد تأطير هذه الرموز بشكل لافت؛ إذ ظهرت الأفعى في النصوص الدينية بوصفها أداة إغواء، وفي السياقات الطبية كرمز للشفاء، وفي العمارة كعنصر وقائي.

تقدم الدراسة ثلاث حالات تحليلية معمقة تبيّن تطور رموز الأفعى بين العصور، وتكشف عن آليات انتقال الرمزية الثقافية، عبر الورش الفنية، والتقاليد النصية، والموروثات الرمزية. تُسهم هذه الدراسة في فهم استمرارية الرموز القديمة عبر التحولات الثقافية، وتكيّفها مع الأطر الدينية الجديدة، مع حفاظها على وظائفها الرمزية الجوهرية. وتشير النتائج إلى أن زخرفة الأفعى في مصر تعبّر عن استمرارية فنية وتفاوض معقّد بين اللغة الرمزية الموروثة والمتطلبات الثقافية المستجدة، مما يضيء على آليات التكيف الرمزي في تاريخ الإنسان.

الكلمات المفتاحية: رمزية الأفعى، مصر القديمة، مصر الإسلامية، الزخرفة، التكيف الثقافي