



2.01 Human-headed crocodile

Dark steatite with green spots.
Probably New Kingdom (c. 1550 – 1070 BC).
L. 8.9 cm, H. 3.2 cm.

The crocodile is lying on a flat base that generally follows the shape of the body. From an anatomical point of view, the sturdy legs are rather clumsily joined to the body. The rather short tail of the animal is folded along the body and the scaly skin is shown in great detail. A smooth wig with triangular lappets disguises the transition to the round human face. The widely set eyes are looking downwards. Despite the rather cursory work, the face has a friendly expression.

Just above the forehead there is some damage to the wig. It is possible that there was once a uraeus here. Because of the position and the small size of the hollow, it is unlikely that the figure once had a crown. Nor is the hollow big enough for a suspension loop. The statuette is uninscribed, but on the right side of the base, below the front leg, is an incised pair of zigzag lines, the meaning of which is unknown.

Representations of human-headed crocodiles are fairly rare. Normally, crocodile gods, most notably Sobek, were depicted either wholly as a crocodile or as a human figure with a crocodile head, i.e. the reverse of what we see here. The oldest representation of a crocodile with a human head appears to be a vignette belonging to Spell 88 of the Book of the Dead of Neferrenpet, who lived during the reign of Ramesses II. In this “spell for assuming the form of a crocodile” the deceased identifies himself with the god Sobek who is feared by all. The present statuette is perhaps to be interpreted along the same lines and may have served as an apotropaic amulet. On the other hand, a few representations of human-headed crocodiles are known from the Late Period which are composite deities, usually Sobek-Osiris or Sobek-Re.¹ The closest parallel to our statuette is a similar object in Budapest said to have come from the Fayyum; it is made of dark-green serpentine and is 11.7 cm long.² It clearly dates from the Late Period. However, judging by the facial characteristics and the hairstyle the present statuette may be earlier and so it is tentatively dated here to the New Kingdom.

Steatite is a rather soft stone that can be scratched with a fingernail. Another name for the stone is soapstone, a reference to the rather greasy feel of the surface. The stone is mainly known from the many surviving small scarabs made from it and is usually a greyish white in colour. Dark grey to black steatite is much rarer. This object also has various green coloured patches. There is a dark-brown deposit in many of the deeper parts, such as between the scales.

The crocodile was hunted in antiquity and it was feared for its great strength and speed both on land and in the water. Besides man, the hippopotamus is its only natural enemy – an adult hippopotamus is able to bite a crocodile in half.



New Kingdom and Third Intermediate Period

Nowadays, crocodiles are only known in the South, but in antiquity these animals lived in the Delta and along the entire Nile River, including the canals and lakes created for irrigating the fields. The lavish fish stocks of the time were the most important source of food for these predators but when they lay in wait at drinking, washing or crossing places they were also a threat to man and his herds.

JvD

- ¹ L. Kákosy, “Krokodil mit Menschenkopf”, *ZÄS*90 (1963), 66–74.
- ² Musée Hongrois des Beaux Arts, Inv. No. 51.329; Kákosy, op. cit., 66–67, figs. 2 a–b.