

Golden Mummies of Egypt

Audio guide

4. Wooden horse

00:00:00 Dr Campbell Price

This horse on wheels measures 11.5 centimetres tall. The horse-shape has been cut out from a plank of wood and decorated with incised lines. It is mounted on 2 wooden axles at the front and back and has four freely rotating wheels.

00:00:17 Greg Jenner

So how many horsepower does this toy have?

00:00:20 Campbell

I've never tried it. Although, Greg, we have made replicas of this.

00:00:27 Greg

Ohh!

00:00:28 Campbell

And they can be dragged and trundled along the ground – quite the thing! And usually, you know me, I would be quite cautious about identifying anything as a toy, but in this case, I think we could probably say this was used by a child as a toy.

00:00:45 Greg

It looks like a toy. It looks like the kind of thing you would give to little toddler, to sort of play with, and it's got that kind of chunky, solid simplicity, that means that if you drop it, it's not gonna break.

00:00:57 Campbell

That sounds like the father of a toddler!

00:01:01 Greg

Yes, I've got a four-year-old, so I'm well aware of what happens. What's lovely about it is that it's a horse with wheels. So, to me it looks like both a horse and a chariot. It looks like, you know, it looks like the horse and the chariot, which makes me think of the Hyksos, who were a people who came to Egypt way before, kind of, the time we're talking about. They were, what, like, probably 1600 BC. So, that's, I mean, a good 1,300 years before, roughly, the exhibition? But they brought horses to Egypt, didn't they?

00:01:40 Campbell

And I think after that point, horses were always a status symbol. It's funny, you know, if you ask anyone about ancient Egypt, they always think about camels. Camels only show up really late, in the Ptolemaic and Roman period. But horses, as you say, Greg, do come into Egypt with this kind of invading force, the Hyksos, who kind of come down from the ancient Levant into Egypt. And ever since then, owning a horse would be something, you know, the military elite, rich people would have.

00:02:12 Greg

So, a toy horse might be for a posh kid, whose mummy and daddy have got a lot of money and they've got some horses. Is this the sort of thing that an ordinary Egyptian kid is going to play with? Probably not?

00:02:26 Campbell

I wonder, I wonder. And whether there is a reference here. The fact that it's a *wooden* horse. We know the ancient Egyptians, well, the Egyptians of this time, of the Ptolemaic and Roman period, knew – we know this because there are documents found near the site this was found in the Faiyum part of Egypt, southwest of modern Cairo – who were reading Homer. And, you know, he writes about the *Trojan* horse; about these guys who sneak in... Well, you tell me! You know more about the Trojan horse than I do!

00:03:05 Greg

Yeah. So, Homer is an ancient Greek poet, who doesn't really write stuff down. He's an oral poet. He says things out loud. In fact, we're not even sure if he exists. He might be loads of poets who all, like, work together, and then they came up with, they made-up a name for him, for the kind of the gang, and came up with this guy called Homer. So, it maybe he's not even a real guy. But Homer tells the story of the Siege of Troy, where all of the, kind of, Greek city states band together to go and attack this huge city of Troy. It takes 10 years, because Helen of Troy has run off to go and marry the wrong guy and everyone's very upset about it. And they can't get into the city walls. It takes forever. And then they come up with a sneaky trick. They build a very, very large wooden horse that's hollow; a huge wooden horse. They stick in loads of soldiers inside and then they leave outside the gate and say, sorry about the war, here's a lovely gift. We're really sorry. We're so sorry. And the Trojans go, oh, a lovely gift! Thanks so much! And they roll it inside. They go to bed, and the Greek soldiers leap

out and open the doors. And then suddenly the army marches in and kills everyone. And this story is called the Iliad. It's a very famous story. It's Homer's Iliad. And the gods are involved as well. They're meddling, you know, those gods love to meddle.

So, a wooden horse. Immediately you do think, oh, it's or a wooden horse on wheels that you can wheel into a city. You're right, it does have a very strong connection to a Greek story. So, we're in, we're talking about Egyptian culture, but as you say, this is the Graeco-Roman time of Egyptian history. So, we have Greek influence. We've had Greek, we've had Macedonian pharaohs called the Ptolemies. They're Greek. They're gonna know all these stories. So, do we think this is a toy from a palace? Is it from a Greek kind of culture? You know, who's playing with these sorts of toys?

00:05:03 Campbell

I wonder, Greg, whether in this case, and just based on what you've said, I'm wondering anew, wondering afresh about this. I think this could have been a fairly regular person's toy, because, if you imagine, as you said, there's a tradition of reading stories out loud. Not a lot of people are sitting, you know, silently reading when we think about, you know, reading books. So, you might have heard this story by a performer somewhere. You've heard bits of the Iliad; you've heard about the Trojan horse. And you say, mum, dad, can I have a toy horse? And you may not be that well off. It's not a very fancy thing.

And, interestingly, this part of Egypt, the Faiyum area, is an area which is settled by retired soldiers, retired Greek and Roman soldiers. So, you wonder if there was maybe a tradition – I mean, it could have been an Egyptian family as well, who'd heard the story, no saying it's not – but there's this kind of, you can imagine this society where there's, you know, people with actual war stories, war tales, telling the younger generation.

00:06:18 Greg

Absolutely, telling this this sort of great legend of the 10-year siege that has ended with a bit of cunning, where you wheel in the horse. Do we know what type of wood it is? I don't think of Egypt being a land of many trees, which might be unfair.

00:06:34 Campbell

It is not. It is absolutely not. The quality of timber native to Egypt is not great. If you wanted to make something really fancy, like, you know, a roof, a massive palace or give the king a beautiful coffin, you brought wood in from Lebanon; from the cedars of Lebanon, from Byblos. So, this looks like local wood, maybe acacia wood, sycamore wood. It's not been analysed by scientists, so we're not sure.

00:07:05 Greg

OK. So, potentially it's a locally grown tree; someone chopped it down and whittled it in their spare time and then handed it to a kid?

00:07:12 Campbell

Yeah.

00:07:13 Greg

Or maybe there's someone making them in a shop and maybe, you know, maybe there's a little, there's a there's a person there, just making thirty, forty, fifty of them, selling them every, you know, every weekend at the local market. It's a lovely thing, isn't it? But it does seem to be, I like the fact that it maybe is connected to this grand story, the Iliad, which is set about 1200 BC. So, the Iliad happens over a millennium before this toy was probably made.

00:07:43 Campbell

So, it really, yeah, survives in folk memory. And I like where you say, maybe there were a few of them made; this is like a set, like you'd get a Mattel doll or, you know, some other company makes dolls. We have, I've seen them in other museums from different sites around the Roman world.

00:08:05 Greg

I'm really surprised you've still got it, though, 'cause it's wood, did it not rot away? Did it not, you know, getting mouldy and damp and turn to mush?

00:08:13 Campbell

Well, that's the great thing about Egypt, Greg, for the most part, if things were buried in tombs or in temples, away from the riverbank – the riverbank's, soggy and wet and used, of course, for farming things in that area where most houses were rot away – but this comes from a site which was on a hill. It was dry. And if you leave something in that sand, then it gets preserved. So, I think we're very lucky, because this is, again, not a big stone statue, it's not a golden mask, it is something someone might have used.

00:08:52 Greg

Yeah, that's beautiful. I love it. Ah, what a treat.