Strange Things: Cultic Ships on Land in Ancient Egypt
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Ships are meant to have water under their hulls: yet, in ancient Egypt some cultic ships, boats, or their facsimiles, never did. For the Egyptians, the Nile served not only as a source of agricultural abundance but also as a superhighway for watercraft. Given the river’s role in Egyptian life, it is hardly surprising that vessels played a significant role in Egyptian cult. In some cases, this led to the perceived need for watercraft, or their replicas, to be transported overland for three primary purposes: as funerary boats, vehicles for deities, and for divination:

Funerary boats.—Egyptian tombs depict the transportation overland of the deceased in boat-shaped catafalques. Prior to burial the mummy crossed over to the west banks of the Nile transported on a papyriform vessel. Upon reaching the west bank the mummy was placed on a catafalque in the shape of a boat, which could be carried, dragged on a sledge, or at times move on wheels. Representations of these vessels sometimes depict them employing more than one method of land transportation.

Vehicles for deities.—Ship-like palanquins served as the conveyance of preference for Egyptian gods when they traveled overland. These travels included sacred celebrations, visits to lands owned by their temples or to the temples of other gods. During these voyages a billowing linen cloth hid the image of the god, which sat in a structure located amidships, from the public. The ship palanquins could be massive and decorated lavishly. One artisan who built these craft describes adorning them “with gold, silver, real lapis-lazuli, turquoise….”

In order to transport them, these portable boat-shaped shrines were secured to purpose-built bases equipped with poles that could be shouldered by priestly porters. G. Legrain termed this base a pavois. These often had a forward edge that recurred similar to a sledge from which they perhaps descended.

The portable boat shrines of the Theban Triad at Karnak—Amun, Mut and Khonsu—are the best known of these remarkable vessels. During the New Kingdom, the Opet Festival at Thebes became the highpoint of the Egyptian cultic calendar, when the statues of these deities ‘sailed’ on
land to their heavily decorated sacred Nile ships, to transfer between the temples of Karnak and Luxor.

*Divination.*—Perhaps the most unusual use of these boats on land was for the purpose of divination. Beginning in the XVIIIth Dynasty, portable boat shrines served as a means for the gods to deliver oracles and instructions to their supplicants. Hatshepsut, Thutmose III, Thutmose IV and Ramses III all describe receiving guidance from the god Amun in this manner. This unusual custom reached it apogee during the XXIst Dynasty, when Upper Egypt was ruled by the high priests of Amun at Thebes. Almost all state decisions appear to have been made by inquiring of Amun, Mut and Khonsu in this manner. The oracles depended on the god’s ‘responses’ as they moved in their boat palanquins. A certain degree of cynicism as to the responses is warranted here, however.

The use of purpose-built ‘land’ watercraft continues to this day in Egypt. No discussion of Egyptian cult vessels transported overland would be complete without a reference to the boats drawn in procession in procession during the *moulid* (birthday celebration) of Sheikh (Sidi) Abu el Haggag el Uqsuri, which takes place each year in Luxor a fortnight before Ramadan. Celebrants tow boats secured on wagons through the city streets. The present festival honors Luxor’s medieval Islamic patron saint, but it is generally considered by Egyptologists to represent a faint memory of the Opet Festival.