

Panthers, leopards and cheetahs. Notes on identification

Elisa CASTEL

One of the most extended inaccuracies in the Egyptological publications, consists on attributing the panther exclusive characteristics and features, in the assumption that the “panther” is a specific animal and not a genus. Besides, there is a certain tendency to include in this term another feline, the cheetah, animal that belongs to another completely independent genus. This work tries to analyse both groups of animals, focusing on their differences and placing them in the context of the Ancient Egypt, where they had a particular importance and meaning.

Una inexactitud presente en buen número de publicaciones egiptológicas, consiste en atribuir a la pantera características y rasgos exclusivos, en la creencia de que "pantera" es un animal específico y no un género de animales. Además existe cierta tendencia a incluir dentro de este término a otro felino, el guepardo, animal que pertenece a otro género completamente independiente. En este trabajo se pretende analizar a ambos grupos de animales, marcando sus diferencias y encuadrándolos dentro del contexto del Egipto Faraónico, donde gozaron de una particular importancia y significado.

IT is quite usual to find, in books and articles about Ancient Egypt, mentions of different types of spotted skins used in priests' attire. In many cases, the animal in question is a leopard and in others, a cheetah, which is an even bigger mistake of identification. Perhaps the confusion in naming a specific animal has its origin in a melanic variety of the leopard—frequent in Asia and the jungle—whose common name was the “Black Panther”.

A modest research in specialized publications demonstrates that apparently the following fact was not considered: under the name “panther” not only can the leopard be

found, but also another feline, the lion. In the second volume of PM¹ (Theban Temples), we find entries for leopards and panthers; we must understand that, when speaking about panthers, the reference usually refers to cheetahs. These felines do not belong to *pantherae*, since they are clearly recognisable, mainly in the Temple of Queen Hatshepsut. In this volume, the entry for “cheetah” does not exist, despite its appearance in other volumes.

Some authors seem to add to this confusion when explaining the clothing of the *sem* priest² and they attribute to a panther what is undoubtedly a leopard skin.³

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1. Porter, B.; Moss, R.L.B.: *Topographical Bibliography of Ancient Egyptian Hieroglyphic, Texts, Reliefs*

and Paintings. 7 vols. Oxford 1934-1991.

2. For instance, Goyon, J-C.: *Rituels funéraires de l'ancienne Égypte*. Paris 1997, 117, 120 (scenes XII, XIX-XXI of the Ceremony of Opening the Mouth).

3. Quirke, S.: *Ancient Egyptian Religion*. London 1992, 102-103; Hornung, E.: *The Valley of the Kings. Horizon of Eternity*. New York, 1990, 61; López, J.: *Mitología y Religión del Oriente Antiguo*. Sabadell 1993, 148.

Other scholars have implemented an intermediate solution: the word “feline”.⁴ But this general word refers to an ample quantity of “big cats”, and does not make the specific classification of the animal clear.

All the examples mentioned demonstrate the difficulties found by some Egyptologists in identifying the leopard skin, something perfectly understandable since the Egyptological tradition has never, until recent years, approached these questions under a taxonomic point of view. The problem arises when we run into the spotted skin of a cheetah, an animal that does not belong to the same group.

TAXONOMIC CLASSIFICATION

In this preliminary research we will attempt to analyse the correct identification of leopards, lions and cheetahs, attempt to define it as clearly as possible and propose a terminology better adapted to reality. We will begin by taxonomically locating these animals, provided their habitat includes the African continent.

The *felinae*⁵ family, belonging to carnivores, has three groups or subfamilies: *Felis* or *Felinae* (cats), *Acinonyx* or *Acinonychinae* (cheetahs) and *Panthera* or *Pantherinae* (lions and leopards).

Within the first group (*Felinae*) are included those commonly called cats, that is to say, the minor sized felines. Limiting ourselves to the African continent we should mention the domestic cat (*Felis catus*), the Sahara cat (*Felis margarita*), the swamp cat (*Felis chaus*), and, within other subgroups, the African wild cat

(*Felis [silvestris] libyca*), the black paw cat (*Felis [Microfelis] nigripes*), the Serval (*Felis [Leptailurus] serval*), the golden cat (*Felis [Profelis] aurata*) and the Caracal or African Lynx (*Felis [Lynx] caracal*).

The second group (*Pantherinae*) consists of bigger animals, such as the lion (*Panthera Leo*) and the leopard (*Panthera pardus*).⁶

Finally the third group (*Acinonychinae*) includes a very specific animal: the cheetah.

We cannot take the first group (*felinae*) as suppliers of skins for priests' attire, since their height in the cross⁷ is too small. Regarding the second group (*pantherinae*), the question is easier. As we have seen, we only have two animals, the leopard and the lion. Identification in both cases would be possible, due to their size (lions have a cross height of 1m and a leopard, about 0,70 cm tall), but the leopard seems to be that which the authors recognise in some paintings and reliefs, because of its spotted skin. Nevertheless, in this article we want to propose the hypothesis that the leopard was not the only animal whose skin was used as priests' attire, and that many of those skins most likely belong to the third group (*Acinonychinae*); and therefore as clothing originating from cheetahs or African ounces (*Acinonyx jabatus*).

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN LEOPARDS AND CHEETAHS

Both animals do not belong to the same group, since there are substantial differences between them; some are shown in Chart 1.

Although their behaviour characteristics are not relevant for iconographic representations,

4. Siliotti, A. & Leblanc, Ch.: *Nefertari e la Valle delle Regine*. Firenze, 1993, 115.
5. All technical data was found in: Grassé, P.P.: *Zoología. Vol. 4: Vertebrados*. Barcelona, 1980. Dorst, J., & Dandelot, P: *Guía de campo de los mamíferos salvajes de África*. Barcelona, 1973, 136-148.
6. Are not included here the Snow Panther (*Panthera*

uncia) (Himalaya and Tibet), the Tiger (*Panthera tigris*), the Puma (*Panthera puma*) or the Jaguar (*Panthera onca*) since, although belonging to the same family, they never lived in the Nile Valley.

7. When speaking about animals, the word “cross” refers to the upper part of their back, where the bones of their arms meet the backbone.

PHYSICAL FEATURES

LEOPARDS

- Stronger than cheetahs. 50 to 82 Kg of average weight and 150 cm long head and back. Tail measuring 90 cm Cross height: 70 cm.
Animal size may vary from small to big depending on its habitat, sabana, desert or jungle.
- Powerful head and neck, stronger jaws than cheetahs'. Long vibrissae (sensorial hairs in whiskers of felines).
- Rosy nose.
- Longer ears than cheetahs'. Ear reverse in black, with a characteristic white spot.
- Stronger and shorter legs than cheetahs'. Adapted to jumping with a great muscular power.
- Very hard nails, totally retractile, sharp and hook shaped, adapted to retain the prey while hunting.
- Soft and thick coat, short hair, spotted with uneven marks in the shape of dark brown or black rosettes, over a pale yellow or pale brownish background. On the lower part of the legs and on the head and in the abdomen the spots are similar to those of the cheetah.
- In the lower internal parts of the legs, low density of spots, over an almost white coat.
- Spots all over the body, except on the stomach, where it has stripped lines.
- No spot under the eyes.
- Uniform spots along the tail, longer than the cheetahs'.

CHEETAHS

- 45 to 60 Kg average weight. Slim constitution. 210 cm long head and back. Tail measuring 75 cm height: 70-80 cm.
- Smaller and rounder head than the leopard. quite short and fragile jaws and longer neck. Short vibrisa.
- Black nose.
- Shorter ears than leopards with a black stripe in the reverse.
- Tall and slender legs with less muscular power than leopard. Adapted for running.
- Rather blunt nails (except for of front legs thumbnails). Not retractile; this feature serves them to remain firmly stuck to the ground while race hunting. They can reach a speed of 90-120 Km an hour in short distances (200-400 m approx.).
- Rough coat long hair in the neck. The spots are in the shape of black dots. They are uniform and well organised over a background, which goes from yellowish brown to pale yellow, almost white. Darker than those of the leopard, they are equally distributed over the body.
- In the lower internal parts of the legs, high density of spots, over an almost white coat.
- Spots all over the body.
- The cheetah has a characteristic dark spot under their eyes in the shape of a teardrop; it goes from the inner angle of the eye to the corner of the mouth. Due to its habit of hunting during the day, these spots protect them against sun.
- Long dotted tail; thinner and thicker at the end where these dots form bands or rings.

Chart 1

BEHAVIOUR ASPECTS

LEOPARDS	CHEETAHS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · They roar. · They hunt by watching and stalking. · Night predators. Their vision is equally good in the daytime and at night. · They are not easily domesticated due to their ferocity. They eat any prey they hunt, carrion, fish, grass, fruits and even eggs. They are not selective with their food. · They usually live alone in their marked territory (except when mating and nursing). · They prefer to hunt on thick forests' dry and open areas. They even hunt in the edge of the Sahara and also in great heights such as the mountains in eastern Africa. They climb in trees, where they usually devour their preys. · They are more frequent in areas of thick bushes and rocky surroundings. They are also found in northern Africa and in Asia. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · They cannot roar. They perform a sound similar to cats when they want to appear aggressive. · They hunt by watching and running. · Generally day hunters. Excellent day vision; poor night vision. · They are easily domesticated since they are not ferocious. They seem to have been controlled since ancient times. It is highly probable that they were used, and they still are, to hunt gazelles which they eat. They are selective with food. · They live in pairs or reduced groups. They do not mark their territory. Their habits are quite nomad. · They prefer to hunt in open, grassy or desertic plains, savannas and African deserts. Because of their their blunt nails they do not usually climb to trees: they do not feel at home on them. They devour their preys in the ground. · Their habitat is the savanna and the grassy extensions.

Chart 2

we are presenting them since they may be determinant while searching for a relationship between the personality and the habits of the animal and the use of their skins by priests. Through sympathetic magics, present day native Africans believe that the use of big felines spotted skins may transmit to its owner a series of the inherent qualities of the animal:

strength, speed, beauty, grace or shrewdness. We can compare these characteristics in chart 2.

Through texts⁸, we can gather that the cheetah did not exist in Egypt, and that it was captured beyond the second cataract or perhaps it was imported from Nubia⁹ where hunters were in charge of supplying both the

8. There are many texts referring to expeditions made to bring what we call exotic products, objects that, due to context, we may suppose that were also exotic to Egyptians. Among them, we will give as example the *Autobiography of Herkhuf*, an individual that in the VI Dynasty travelled to the land of Yam to get some of them... *I came dawn with three hundred donkeys loaded with incense, ivory hekenu-oil, sat, panther skins, elephant's tusks*

throw sticks, and all sort of good products. Lichtheim, M.: *Ancient Egyptian Literature*. Vol. 1, 26. Berkeley 1975.

9. Houlihan, P.F.: *The Animal World of the Pharaohs*. London, 1996, 93, 199. The author states that both cheetahs and leopards were imported from Nubia or Punt. Störk, L: s.v. "Gepard". *LÄ II*, 1976, 530. He notes the fact that recent fauna lists mention the isolated existence of cheetah to the west of Alexandria.

crown and the priests. Nevertheless, due to its high symbolic meaning, the use of spotted feline skins was probably regulated; hence the hunting of these animals was never a massive activity. Such presents were given to the king and exclusively used for the clothing of a much-defined group among priests, and also as a sign of power, by covering the seat of certain chairs, as we will see later. Despite this fact, we know of some cases in which the skins of leopards or cheetahs worn by priests were not genuine, and that Egyptians made imitations.¹⁰ An important example is the skin, adorned with gold stars and silver paws, which was found in the tomb of Tutankhamun.

SKINS WITH MAGICAL POWER

In the oldest religious texts, there is a great amount of references to these felines, calling them sometimes leopards and sometimes panthers,¹¹ but always emphasising their magical power.

The use of skins as an element transmitting power is widely documented in all cultures, mainly in Africa, from ancient to present times.¹² The skin gave a special protection to the person who wore it. This is perfectly

logical in Egypt, mainly when used by the *sem* priest. Upon the death of an individual, one of his duties was to go into a trance,¹³ to search for the *ka* of the deceased and bring it back. The deceased then could participate in rites celebrated during the funerals, as shown in the ritual of the *Opening of the Mouth*. This ritual is very similar to actions performed by shamans.

Another priest who used skins as attire was the *iwnmutef*. He represented the eldest son, who personalised the child Horus in funerary ceremonies and who, due to his condition of young heir, was adorned with a sidelock of hair. The feline skin, which covered him, was usually used as a dress, quite differently from the *sem* priest who wore it as a cloak. It seems that in reliefs and paintings, the *iwnmutef* frequently used skins with cheetah characteristics (dot shape spots and not retractile nails), while the *sem* priest used to wear leopard skins.

CHEETAHS AND LEOPARDS IN ICONOGRAPHY

From the Old Kingdom¹⁴ to the Ptolemaic Period, leopards were more or less represented clearly and their presence in reliefs and

10. A fake leopard skin of the XII Dynasty can be seen in Osborn, D.J. and Osbornová, J.: *The Mammals of Ancient Egypt*. Warminster, 1998, pl. 7-225.
11. Faulkner, R.O.: *The ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*. Oxford 1969. As an example: *Your garment is the leopard-skin, your garment is the kilt* (§223); *my leopard skin is on me, my sceptre is in my hand* (§907-908); *he shall not possess a leopard skin* (§1027); *I live with my double, my panther skin is on me, my sceptre is in my arm* (§338). Faulkner, R.O.: *The ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts*. Vol. 1-3. Warminster, 1977: *the Great Ones have received their leopard skins* (Spell 49); *see me in your sight as a panther* (Spell 379).
12. For this argument see Cervelló Autuori, J.: *Egipto y Africa. Origen de la civilización y la monarquía faraónicas en su contexto africano*. Sabadell, 1996, 55, 69, 72-73. Among African cultures using spotted skins, we could mention the Karamocho, who lived between Kenya and Northwest of Uganda. They are warriors speaking an African language of nilotic type. We can also mention the Nuer, who live in Sudan. Among them there is a chief named "Leopard Skin". See Evans-Pritchard: *The Nuer*. Barcelona 1992, Pl. XIV.
13. Goyon, J.-C.: *op. cit.* 114. This event seems quite clear in the text of the *Book of the Opening of the*

Mouth: Disposition dans le Château de l'Or. Dormition du prêtre-Sem. *Dormir* (indication scénique).

Disposition dans le Château de l'Or. Dormition du prêtre-Sem recouvert du camail. Il dort. Le sommeil est venu à lui très vite, il est venu à lui très vite-.

Le prêtre-Sem: s'asseoir devant lui.

Paroles prononcées: Il m'a brisé. (Indication scénique) *Dormir*.

Le prêtre *Imy-is*: se dresser derrière lui.

[Le prêtre-Sem]; paroles prononcées: Il m'a frappé! (indication scénique) *Dormir profondément*.

Le prêtre *Imy-is*: parler quatre fois. A dire par le prêtre *Imy-is*: Mon père, mon père! -quatre fois- Éveil du dormeur: le prêtre *Sem*; accueillir les prêtres *Imy-khent*.

14. Leopards appear before this period in some Predynastic palettes. Although they are usually shown modifying their physical characteristics, especially in their necks which are represented in snake shape. See the Palette of the Two Dogs (Ashmolean M. E. 3924) or the Louvre palette where one of these animals is shown (Cervelló Autuori, J.: *op. cit.*, pl. 28) Later on, the Narmer palette will also present the same animal (Cairo M. JE 32169).

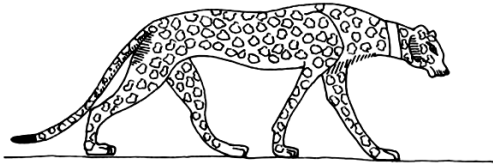


Figure 1: Leopard from the tomb of Rekhmire at Thebes

paintings is constant, while cheetahs do not appear until the Middle Kingdom, in the decoration of Beni Hassan tombs, and later in the tomb of Rekhmire (TT 100, entrance, north wall) or of Amenmose (TT89, entrance, east wall) among others.

A distinction between both animals can be perceived in all periods: the leopard is represented with its neck slightly down and forward (figure 1), while the cheetah has an arrogant air, with a high head and a neck perpendicular to the body. Moreover, the physical characteristics of both animals can be distinguished without any difficulty.

When describing the contents of the southern area of the second terrace¹⁵ in Queen Hatshepsut's Temple at Deir el-Bahari, and more specifically the expedition to the land of Punt, Édouard Naville¹⁶ mentions the presence in reliefs of two types of panthers: one from the south¹⁷ and another from the north, specifying that the latter is of smaller size. In the first case, we would clearly have the representation of a leopard and that of a cheetah in the second case (figure 2). Even more, plate LXXX clearly depicts two

cheetahs and a leopard, while on plate LXXVI there is a leopard. There is no doubt in other reliefs; for instance, in the wall fragment from the tomb-chapel of Sobekhotep, now in the British Museum, we can clearly recognise a Nubian transporting a leopard skin to Egypt, among other exotic products.¹⁸

During the New Kingdom, leopards and cheetahs are frequently included in processions where Nubians present gifts to the king; the priests who use these garments are usually found in funerary contexts.

Cheetahs:

Cheetahs were also used for security and hunting purposes. They were domesticated and could be kept in captivity,¹⁹ even as pets.

In the papyrus of Ani (vignette 12) we find two priests clad in feline spotted skins. This is a good opportunity to identify them, since they are apparently not alike. The priest in the

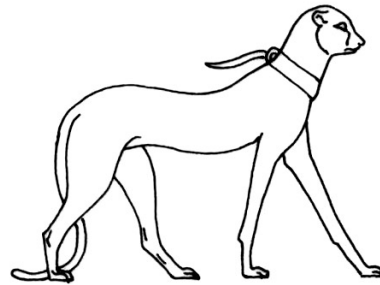


Figure 2: Cheetah from the funerary temple of Hatshepsut at Deir el-Bahari

15. Naville, E.: *The Temple of Deir el-Bahari*. Vol. III. London, 1898, 17.

16. In this temple we find again the image of cheetahs and leopards distinctly recognisable, both in the south half of middle columns and in upper columns.

17. Skins of the "south panther" are also mentioned in *Urk.* IV, 329, 10.

18. Störk, L.: s.v. "Leopard", *LÄ* III, 1979, 1006-1007. "ist die weitest verbreitete Katze Afrikas. Noch in diesem Jh. soll er im südl. Sinai sowie

westl. von Alexandrien zwischen der Mareotis und der Oase Siwa vorgekommen sein. Danach wird er in altäg. Zeit auch in der übrigen Landesteilen einigermaßen verbreitet gewesen sein."

19. Houlihan, P.F.: *op. cit.* 69, 200 and chapters 4 and 8. There is a curious scene which can be seen in the tomb of Ptahotep II in Sakkara (V Dynasty). In the relief we see a leopard and a lion locked in cages, to be transported.

lower register wears a feline skin of uniform dots and striped tail with a crest at its end. The nails are not retractile, so it could probably be a cheetah (figure 4). In the skin worn by the priest in the upper register, we observe that, although it keeps the order and shape of the dots, its paws have retractile nails, its tail has no stripes, and its end does not seem to have any crest, one can easily be mistaken; yet it seems to represent a leopard. In the same papyrus we find *sem* priests with the characteristic leopard skins; there is no possible confusion if we observe the layout of the rosette shaped spots (vignettes 5, 6 and 15).

The cheetah can also be clearly identified in the tomb of Ramesses IX: both on the left and right of the door, at the antechamber's entrance, are two representations of *iwnmutef* priests, making libations, clad in a skin whose spots are distinct black dots, having no rosettes. The paws show non-retractile nails.

The same can be seen in the tomb of Amenemhat (TT44): on the north wall of the first chamber is a priest dressed in a skin with dark dots, even distributed. He is wearing the skin over a typically Ramesside white dress, and his head is shaven. Another similar case is that of Amenemopet, a priest of Amun from XXII dynasty. On the inner part of his coffin (British M. EA 22941) he seems to wear a skin that could be a cheetah's. Although the animal's head is not clearly seen, the spots are dark, dot-shaped, the paw nails are not retractile and the tail is very long, with a light crest at its end.

The cheetah skin was also used to cover certain shields. Two examples of this use were found in the tomb of Tutankhamun. In this case, it is possible that the use of this skin gave the king a special power against his enemies.

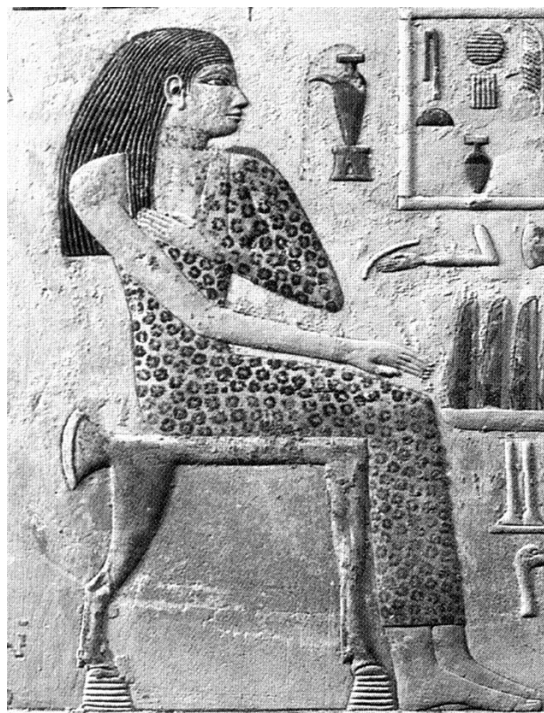


Figure 3: Fragment of the stela of Nefertibet, (Louvre Museum)

Leopards:

The stela of Nefertibet (Louvre M. E22745, figure 3) is a clear example of a well-designed leopard, with asymmetrical irregular rosettes; on which the deceased wears the skin as a dress. Some Dynasty IV sarcophagi have a leopard skin carved on their lids.²⁰ The same occurs on two representations of a *sem* priest in the tomb of Sennefer (TT96, S and SE walls). In both scenes not only are the leopard skin rosettes perfectly drawn, but also the paw nails are retractile, hence not shown in the paintings (figure 5).

There are also some other examples where the leopard skin is used as garments for priests of specific deities. Indeed, the goddess Seshat appears with this skin covering her own dress, as we can see in a beautiful polychrome relief

20. Donadoni Roveri, A.M.: *I Sarcophagi egizi delle origini alla fine dell'Antico Regno*. Roma 1969, 122-123. The author does not seem to make any difference between leopard as specific animal and panther as a group. Therefore, in the text she

speaks about the representation of the skin identifying it as "pelle di felino, pantera o leopardo" (Cairo M. CGC 6170 and 6007). The first one is anonymous and the second one belongs to someone named *Iry-n-wr*.

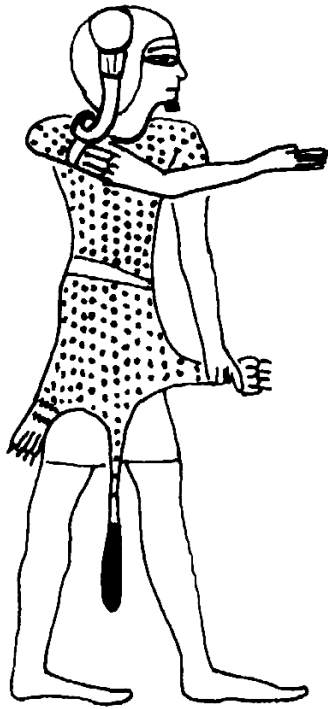


Figure 4: Priest wearing a cheetah skin from the papyrus of Ani (British Museum).

of her, that is located inside the temple of Ramesses II in Derr.²¹ And during the Late Period is the god Bes who frequently wears a leopard skin.²²

Similarly the figure of these felines is used in garments when persons ornate themselves just with the animal's head. It frequently appears this way on belts of New Kingdom kings.²³

Some small golden feline heads²⁴ found in the tomb of the famous Tutankhamun were part of his priest attire and are highly revealing since they clearly distinguish the taxonomic differences between cheetah and leopard. What is today displayed in the Egyptian

Museum of Cairo as number 914 perfectly shows the teardrop of the cheetah, while number 746 only shows the stripes identifying the leopard. This animal is equally depicted in the same tomb, in some golden figures of wood,²⁵ which undoubtedly represents a leopard.

Another very ancient object in Egyptian iconography is the *Imiut* fetish. It consists of a skin hanging from a vertical stick; the base of this stick is held in an open container. The mention of this object arouses problems, since specialists do not seem to agree on defining if the skin hanging from the stick is that of a leopard or of a bull; in any case, it is usually associated with the god Nemty and much later to Anubis. Nevertheless, it seems that at the end of XVIII Dynasty, these representations were more similar to that of a feline and



Figure 5: Priest wearing a leopard skin from the tomb of Sennefer (Thebes West).

21. Bonnet, H.: *Reallexikon der ägyptischen Religionsgeschichte*. Berlin 1971. He mentions this skin simply as panther's.
 22. See, as an example, the small faience jar I.989.281.94 of the Metropolitan M. of New York.
 23. Störk, L. *op. cit.*, 1006-1007. He states the relationship between heads and leopard skins with fertility.

24. These heads were found inside box 21, according to numbers given by Carter. The priest skins were in the same box.
 25. Cairo M. 289a, 289b. Both were found in the Treasure Chamber. If we identify them as leopard's, we will have to do the same in the tomb of Amenhotep II and with the one painted over the walls of Sethy II burial, since they are very similar.

indeed, in the papyrus of the lady Sheritwebeshet from XXI Dynasty (Cairo M. 133), the complete skin of a feline (including its head) is clearly recognisable.

Finally we will only mention the existence of leopard skins in the seats of folding chairs, used exclusively by kings and high rank men as a sign of power; perhaps the pharaoh could offer these chairs to important dignitaries in specific occasions. These seats were never used by gods or by women.²⁶

Figures presenting confusion

It is significant that the Egyptians were able to perfectly distinguish between cheetahs and leopards in reliefs and paintings where the animal is represented alive, while there exists a certain confusion when their skins are represented as priest attire. In some occasions we can accurately identify a cheetah skin, in some others a leopard's, and finally there is a third group with the characteristics of both. The fact becomes even more complicated when we observe, for instance, a leopard with all its characteristics, but referred erroneously as a cheetah, as it occurs in the tomb of Baqt III in Beni Hassan.²⁷

There are many misleading representations. Among them, we can mention the tomb of Tutankhamun, the chapel of Maia (now in the Egyptian Museum of Turin) and the tomb of Sennedjem (TT1). In these cases, the spots are clearly (leopard) rosettes and the heads are apparently bigger. The lines under the eyes do not show a teardrop shape, but rather they are lines, which give an aspect and the perspective of a feline. Apart from these details, almost all the characteristics of the cheetah are kept since in all examples, their non-retractile nails can be identified.

In the papyrus of Hunnefer (vignette 5) we can perfectly see that the animal represented has almost all the features of a cheetah. Skin spots are even, dark, dot-shaped (not rosettes, like leopards) and symmetrically laid out; the head of the feline is of a small size; the lines under its eyes are teardrop shaped; there is a dark stripe along its back; its tail ends with a pattern of rings over an almost white background, and has a kind of crest at its end. Moreover, the white colour of the thorax and abdomen, as well as the retractile paw nails, can clearly be distinguished; these are both characteristics of the leopard.

The difficulty is even bigger when two different species of the *Pantherinae* family –the lion and the leopard– are involved: as an example, we could mention the representation of Yesterday and Tomorrow (*sf dw3w*) in the papyrus of Ani (vignette 7).²⁸

TERMINOLOGY AND TEXTS

There is some difficulty in identifying the leopard in hieroglyphic texts. Looking up entries in dictionaries, we find that the word used to name panthers/leopards/cheetahs is somehow confusing; yet it seems that this confusion did not originate with the ancient Egyptians, but with modern translations (chart 3).

The group *panthera* in its entirety is often mentioned as the only specific animal, and, as its only identification, it is located in one geographical area. Therefore we could state that *3by* and *b3* have been translated as panther (erroneously relating it to the specific animal, and not to a group). It is fairly probable that Egyptians used these words to commonly name this group of carnivorous mammals as

26. Sweeney, D.: "The man on the folding chair: An Egyptian relief from Beth Shean", *IEJ* 48, 51.

27. Osborn, D.J. and Osbornová, J.: *op. cit.*, pl. 7-222.

28. About these complex shapes see: Westendorf, W.: s.v. "Panther", *LA* IV 1982, 664-665.

	panther	leopard	cheetah
Gardiner ²⁹	3by	3by, b3	--
Faulkner ³⁰	3by	b3	--
Wb ³¹	--	3by, 3by šm ^c b3 šm ^c	3by mh b3 mh
Année Lexicographique ³²	3by, b3	b3, mh	3by mh
LÄ ³³	--	3by 3by šm ^c , b3 b3 šm ^c knmwt	nt(y)t 3by 3by mh m3fdt (?)

Chart 3

we do nowadays when we speak of “panthers”.

We also find that 3by, knmwt, b3, 3by šm^c and b3 šm^c have been translated as leopard;³⁴ we must emphasize that the last word (b3 šm^c) places the animal in a geographic area which refers to it as the southern panther (we understand that once again the confusion between family and species is evident); this means that the panther is included within the *Felidae* family, but is placed in a concrete area as a method of identification. For the cheetah we have the words 3by mh³⁵ and b3 mh³⁶

which, following the same system, means northern panther. We conclude that the Egyptians added to the word that could identify “panther” (or perhaps “spotted skin feline”) another meaning, which sets its ubication and therefore clearly defines the animal to which they refer.

It is quite frequent to find texts where the king is identified with a leopard to acquire and demonstrate some of its ferocious strength. Thus, in the XVIII Dynasty we find that the king is referred to as “the one who appears as a leopard” by only using the ideogram of this

29. Gardiner, A.: *Egyptian Grammar*. Oxford 1988, 460, 462, 620, 617.

30. Faulkner, R.O.: *A Concise Dictionary of Middle Egyptian*. Oxford, 1988, 2, 77.

31. Erman, E. y Grapow, H.: *Wörterbuch der ägyptischen Sprache*. Vol I. (7, 11-14), 415. Leipzig-Berlin, 1982.

32. Meeks, D.: *Année Lexicographique*. Tome I, (1977), Paris, 1980, entries 77.9927, 77.1160. pg. 3, 109.

33. *LÄ* II, 1976, 530, III, 1979, 1006, IV, 1982, 664-665.

34. Störk, “Leopard”, 1006.

35. Mr. Agustin Barahona pointed to me that the root mh has many other meanings that could also be related

to this subject: “fill (with)”, or “be stuffed (with)” could refer to the animals’s skin; “be complete” or “totally be” could mean, in this case, that it is not an hybrid; “(to hold) captive, held, grasped, supported” could make reference to the far origin of the cheetah and its domestication. This simply opens new study fields, which obviously require a revision of original texts, since it only refers to the biconsonantic root, and not to the derived forms. A conscious revision of deter-minatives accompanying this root would also be needed. See: Faulkner: *op. cit.* 113.

36. Störk, L. *op. cit.* 1006.

animal.³⁷ This statement has been interpreted as a declaration of war. It seems that for the king, the leopard has a more important role than the cheetah. The leopard roars, while a cheetah cannot. We cannot affirm that the latter was not used for the same liturgical purposes, since the features of its skin are similar to leopards.

Egyptian literature also informs us of the importance of those skins and, for instance, in the *Tale of the Eloquent Peasant*, the peasant from Wadi Natrun loads on his donkeys several commodities to exchange in the marketplace; among there are panther skins (*b3w*);³⁸ there is no doubt that in this case these are leopards.

The Egyptians used the same word to indicate some felines with spots over their skin. This does not mean that they did not know the differences between one and the other; even though it has been clearly demonstrated that they were meticulous in their representations; in this case what really matters is the spotted skin and not really the species itself.

THE LEOPARD AND THE STARS

The origin of the use of “spotted” skin, whether of a leopard or a cheetah, is very ancient. Perhaps it dates to prehistoric times

and was related to cults of the African-Nilotic substrate. Feline spotted skins (cheetah or leopard) always appear in relation to magical-priestly uses and I do not know of any representation where they perform another function, since their use has always been referred to as a dress or cloak.

Although spotted skin has been put in relation with the goddess Mafdet, the animal, which represents her, has not been accurately determined yet and writers have different interpretations for its identification. Some identify it with a feline (perhaps the leopard,³⁹ the lynx, the wild cat or the lion), others believe that it represents a genet and finally, a third group argues it could have been a mongoose.⁴⁰

Yet according to an hypothesis of Westendorf,⁴¹ the sky could have been represented, in some local theology, as a big female cat (possibly a female leopard) who ate the sun when the night arrived and gave birth to it in the morning (as did the goddess Nut). Its womb was full of stars (the spots of its skin) and its legs were the pillars supporting the sky.

The relation between the leopard and the stars could have appeared from the identification of the spots of the skin of this animal and the stars that fill the firmament. The priests of Heliopolis used to wear the skin of this feline, adorned with stars. There are many occasions where they can clearly be observed: for instance, in a statue belonging to Aanen (Turin

37. *Urk IV*, 139, lines 9-10. “His Majesty appeared as a panther after having heard it” (Translation A. Hernández). The text belongs to the reign of Thutmose II and speaks of a rebellion in Nubia. It refers to the moment in which the king realises what happened. The text reflects this phrase. It may wish to emphasise the fact that the king appears before the Nubians without their being aware of his arrival, but absolutely furious.
38. Wente, E.F y Simpson W.K.: *The Literature of Ancient Egypt*. Yale University 1972, 32. Parkinson, R.B.: *The Tale of the Eloquent Peasant*. Oxford 1991, 3 of texts.
39. Franco, I.: *Pequeño Diccionario de Mitología Egipcia*. Barcelona, 1994, 82. Bonnet, H.: *Op. Cit.*, 1971, 434. s.v. *Mafdet: Man hat es als Wildkatze, Panther katze, Luchs oder auch Gepard angesprochen*. On page 581 we find an identification of Mafdet with the word designing a cat form: See

also, J. Malek.: *The Cat in Ancient Egypt*. London, 1993, 77 and Osborn, D.J, with Osbornová, J.: *The mammals of Ancient Egypt*. Warminster 1998, 117 on this subject.

40. Shaw, I. y Nicholson, P.: *British Museum Dictionary of Ancient Egypt*. London, 1995, 139.

41. Westendorf, W.: s.v. “Himmelsvorstellungen”, *LÄ II*, 1215-1218; s.v. “Panther”, *LÄ IV*, 1982, 664-665, y *Altaegyptische Darstellungen des Sonnenlaufes auf der abschuessigen Himmelsbahn*, Berlin, 1966. From another point of view and from the etymological study of the name of Mafdet.: Kammerzell, F.: *Panther, Löwe und Sprachentwicklung im Neolithikum. Bemerkungen zur Etymologie des ägyptischen Theonyms Mafdet zur Bildung einiger Raubriernamen im Ägyptischen und zu einzelnen Grosskatzenbezeichnungen indoeuropäischer Sprachen*. Göttingen, Seminar für Ägyptologie und Koptologie, 1994. See note 20.

M. 1377) and also in a sculpture representing the god Amun and king Tutankhamun, who is clad in this starry skin (Louvre M. E 11609). In the Theban necropolis, and more precisely in the tomb of Userhat (TT51), we can observe a figure composed of three priests dressed in skins. In this case, the feline spots are indeed painted, but these spots had rosettes drawn over them including five-point stars and the name of king Sethy I written in a cartouche, near one of his shoulders.

Finally we will mention the skins, genuine or fake, found in the tomb of Tutankhamun (numbered by Carter 21t, 44q and 46ff). The first one was made of linen with a pattern simulating the spots of the animal skin; the second one also had gold five-point stars and silver paws. The third (authentic) was inlaid in gold.

If we go further in these symbols, there also existed a late tradition in which Seth (murderer of Osiris) after killing his brother, changed into a big “panther”(?). When he was located, he was skinned off as a punishment and his skin, marked by fire. This was how the leopard / cheetah spots were created. The funerary priests would have been ordered to use this skin to commemorate the defeating of evil forces, personified by Seth.⁴² The text says:

But Seth avoided them [Horus and Thot] and turned into a panther in this nome. Anubis, nevertheless, got hold of him and Thot read again his magical spells against him. Thus he [Seth] fell on the ground before them. Anubis tied up his body in the east of the big hall. When the smell of his grease reached the heaven, it spread over this magnificent place and Re and the rest of the gods took this smell as a pleasant one. Then Anubis cut the skin of Seth, stripped it off and put it over himself [Anubis]. After that, he entered in the wabet of Osiris to make libations to his father “Seth is here”.

And the wab priest of this god has been named *setem* for this reason. And he [Anubis]

marked on him [Seth] his seal on fire, which lasts until the present day.

Because of this, there is a panther skin over the *setem* priest until the present day”.⁴³

We observe that, as it is traditional in Egypt, the leopard and the cheetah would appear under two distinct shapes presenting some antagonisms, good and evil (the heaven and the murderer of Osiris). But in this last case there is a double meaning, since the priest is covered with a skin that gives him the power of good over evil.

CONCLUSION

Considering the above interpretation, we might think over the biological attribution given in many cases to spotted skins represented in reliefs, paintings and statuary. It is definitely incorrect to use the term panther since, as we have noticed, the cheetah is not a panther and sometimes this skin shows enough details to place it in the family and species *Acinonyx jubatus*. It can also be stated that some skins are really leopards, others are cheetahs’ and that a third group has the characteristics of both animals.

Nevertheless, some new questions arise. Did the Egyptians, as conscious as they were in their representations, really know or wish to distinguish between the leopard and the cheetah when representing the skin of the dead animal? It certainly seems strange that these people, able to represent live animals in much detail, hence allowing us to classify them, expressed an absolute lack of ability in other cases. It seems that both cheetahs and leopards were apothropaic animals; therefore it is possible that they indistinctly used features from both, when representing the attire of the priest, simply because they were spotted skins, which was what really mattered most.

42. Vandier, J.: *Le Papyrus Jumilhac*. Paris, 1962, part II, lines 6-15.

43. Translation Antonio Hernández.

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