Ancient Egyptian royalty in *Fate/Grand Order*

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*Fate/Grand Order*, and the *Fate* franchise in general, is probably something all historians, archaeologists and literature scholars at large curse every time they do a Google Search for a historical figure or famous literary character. For instance, just google ‘Astolfo’ and there’s a good chance that the first result you’ll get is the character from *Fate* and not the original one from the *Matter of France*. But how can a reincarnation of a character in a Japanese game supersede the original?

It all started in 2004 with *Fate/stay night*, a computer game. More accurately, an eroge (エロゲ). It quickly developed into a franchise, with the first manga and anime appearing in 2006 and excluding the 18+ portion of the original game. Afterwards, more games, anime and all sort of merchandise made *Fate* increasingly prominent in Japan. And then, *Fate/Grand Order* happened.

*Fate/Grand Order* (henceforth FGO) is a video game developed by Delightworks (mobile version, released in 2014) and Sega AM2 (arcade version, 2018). It is a huge hit in Japan and the top-grossing mobile game in the country. Worldwide, it has grossed more than 4 billion US dollars (ca. 80% from Japanese players alone), being on par with Niantic’s *Pokémon Go* (SuperData, 2019; Chapple, 2020). Just to put it into perspective, FGO is available in very few countries outside Japan, while *Pokémon GO* is a global phenomenon. And what’s more, FGO has for the past two years been the dominating game in numbers of tweets, beating the likes of *Fortnite* (Park, 2020).

The main idea of the series is that combatants fighting for the Holy Grail can summon powerful allies to help them. The combatants are known as ‘Masters’, while the summoned allies are known as ‘Servants’. The Servants are historical, mythological or literary figures, extracted from various cultures around the world.¹

In this article, I’ll give historical and archaeological background to those Servants extracted from Ancient Egypt. Why? Well, firstly, because I love Ancient Egypt and I think it is not as widely discussed as I would like it to be. Secondly, because those characters are a tad more obscure than the usual Servants² and deserve more time in the spotlight.

A QUICK PRIMER TO ANCIENT EGYPT

Ancient Egypt, as a recognizable distinct entity, lasted for around 3,000 years. That is a lot of time and Egypt went through several different periods during its existence. *Fate* characters were taken from different periods and we need to put that into perspective. So, let’s start by taking a look

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¹ Note that some Servants are gender-bent female versions of the original figures to cater to a predominantly straight male audience.

² That is, Saberfaces.
at the table below (compiled from Shaw, 2004), showing each period and its start and end dates.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Dynasties</th>
<th>Date</th>
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<tr>
<td>Predynastic Periods (Neolithic)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>5300–3000 BCE</td>
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<td>Early Dynastic Period</td>
<td>1–2</td>
<td>3000–2686 BCE</td>
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<td>Old Kingdom</td>
<td>3–8</td>
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<td>New Kingdom</td>
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<td>Third Intermediate Period</td>
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<td>1069–715 BCE</td>
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<td>Late Period</td>
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<td>Macedonian Era</td>
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<td>Ptolemaic Era</td>
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<td>Roman Era</td>
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<td>30 BCE – 395 CE</td>
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<td>Byzantine Era</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>395–641 CE</td>
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<td>Arab conquest</td>
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<td>641 CE</td>
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When people think about Ancient Egypt, the first image that will come to mind will likely be the pyramids. The “classic” trio of pyramids of Giza was built during the 4th Dynasty, in the Old Kingdom. But in spite of that being a rather early stage of Ancient Egypt, many people associate pyramids with later events, especially with the times of two of the most famous Pharaohs: Ramesses II and Cleopatra VII. Ramesses II (sometimes spelled Rameses or Ramses), known as Ramesses the Great, belongs to the 19th Dynasty — therefore, to the New Kingdom. That is over 1,200 years after the pyramid-builders of the 4th Dynasty. Cleopatra VII (the famous Cleopatra) ruled during the Ptolemaic Period, the final one before Roman conquest. Again, almost 1,200 years after Ramesses II.

That means many people imagine Ancient Egypt as a hybrid of distinct periods, as if 3,000 years of history were a homogeneous thing. So please keep that idea of different periods and times in mind while you read.

**THE SERVANTS**

I won’t go through a detailed explanation of Servants here; I’d rather keep things simple for this article and focus on the Ancient Egypt part of FGO. In any event, if you’re reading this, you probably know your stuff already. Suffice to say Servants are RPG characters: they have character classes (Archer, Lancer, etc.) with Pokémon-like effectiveness against one another, and they even have Dungeons & Dragons alignments. Their special attack is called Noble Phantasm (ノウブル・ファンタズム). When summoned, Servants usually appear in a form that represents their “golden age” or the “prime of their lives” (TYPE-MOON Wiki, 2020). If you want to know more about Servants in the Fate franchise, take a look at the TYPE-MOON Wiki; for more specific information about Servants in FGO (game stats, etc.), see the Fate/Grand Order Wikia.

Now let’s go to the Egyptian Servants, in chronological order. For the section below, I am drawing information from numerous published academic sources. I won’t cite them all in the text as usual, because that would impair the reading with loads of references. But I point out the main sources for further reading in case you want to learn more about any given topic. All other sources are listed further below in the References section.

I’ll focus exclusively in what is represented in FGO; otherwise, this article would become longer than my doctoral thesis. But I will bring in tidbits from other corners of the Fateverse every now and then, when it’s
appropriate for the discussion. If you’re a devout fan of the franchise, please forgive me if I fail to mention some piece of information from sources other than FGO.

Nitocris

Nitocris, stages 2 and 3. Art by Shima Udon.

Nitocris (or Nocret) was once thought to be the last Pharaoh of the 6th Dynasty and hence, of the Old Kingdom (around 2,180 BCE), before Egypt fell into the troubled times of the First Intermediate Period. Her name appeared in the works of Manetho (a priest who compiled the Aegyptiaca, a list of Egyptian kings, during the 3rd century BCE) and Herodotus (the famous Ancient Greek historian). However, her name never appeared in any pre-Manetho Egyptian source and she became somewhat of a legendary figure, with archaeologists hotly debating her existence.

It is now known that the last Pharaoh of the 6th Dynasty was actually Netjerkare Siptah (also spelled as Neitiqerty Siptah), a male king. His name was misread in fragmentary sources and that mistake gave rise to the legendary Nitocris. You can find the full story in the work of Ryholt (2000).

Although there is no arguing with evidence, that revelation is quite a bummer, depriving the world of a cool mysterious female Pharaoh. By the time the Fate franchise began, it was already known (at least in academia) that Nitocris was not a historical person. The game, however, indicates her origin in historical fact, clearly following outdated academic literature. In any event, her non-historical status wouldn’t prevent Nitocris from appearing in Fate, since the franchise is famous for another legendary ruler of dubious historicity.

In FGO, Nitocris appear with an Ancient Egyptian-inspired outfit and jewelry, with the exception of the weird choice of platform shoes. She carries a was-scepter, which is often seen held by pharaohs and represents power and dominion. That scepter usually consists of a long vertical shaft with a forked base and is surmounted by an animal head, so Nitocris’ scepter is spot-on. Nitocris belongs to the Caster class, so the idea of her carrying a staff also fits with staple fantasy spellcasters.

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A was-scepter made of faience; Nubia, Late Period (center portion restored). The animal head represents the god Set. Photo by Joan Lansberry 1995–2012; image extracted from http://www.joanannlansberry.com.

Given the prominence of kemonomimi in Japanese pop culture, Nitocris is shown with a pair of Anubis-like ears on top of her head, though the game mistakenly considers it an attribute of Horus. In later ascension stage, Nitocris’ hair is banded in dark blue and golden and thus becomes reminiscent of the nemes headdress used by pha-

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3 I’ll try writing about those in the future.

4 Kemonomimi (獣耳) literally means “animal ears” and denotes an anime/manga character with, well, animal ears. Other features such as a tail and fangs might also be present.
raohs. Finally, Nitocris has red facial paint, which is a little weird at first sight. There is some evidence of rouge-like facial paint from reliefs (and also items found in tombs), but we don’t know the exact usage of it or how pervasive it was. Curiously, though, Manetho stated in his *Aegyptiaca* (known to us just from later authors and translations) that Nitocris was the noblest and loveliest of all women, of fair complexion with red cheeks. Could her character designer have read Manetho’s work?

In the game, Nitocris is Lawful Good, which is consistent with a pharaoh (see the discussion of Ozymandias below), and is known as “Avatar of the Sky”, possibly a reference to the idea of the pharaoh being an incarnation of Horus, god of kingship and the sky (see also Salvador, 2016).

Nitocris’ Noble Phantasm is called “Anpu Neb Ta Djeser” (translated as “Nether Mirror Thesaurus” or “Nether Mirror Canonical Text” in the franchise). It features Anubis and a large mirror that spills out evil spirits onto Nitocris’ enemies. That has absolutely nothing to do with Ancient Egypt. Rather, it is taken from a short story called “The Mirror of Nitocris” by horror writer Brian Lumley, who portrays Nitocris as an evil vengeful queen. Lumley wrote in the Cthulhu Mythos of H.P. Lovecraft, who had previously portrayed Nitocris as an evil queen.  

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5 I’d wager that’s just the typical misogyny of Lovecraft, but I confess I didn’t read the stories where she appears and can’t be made to read anything else written by him.
origins and how Japanese pop culture embraced him (Salvador, 2017); so, consider yourself invited to read it. He is also present in Nitocris’ attack animations in FGO (in both Assassin and Caster incarnations), shooting beams from his eyes as usual.

Close-up of Sheet 76 of the Greenfield Papyrus showing Medjed. See if you can spot him! Image retrieved from Salvador (2017), courtesy of the British Museum, ©Trustees of the British Museum.

In her Assassin guise, Nitocris’ Noble Phantasm is called “Sneferu Iteru Nile”. It has been translated as “Cleanse the impurities, blue and beautiful Nile” in FGO, but it is just the words Sneferu (first pharaoh of the 4th Dynasty), Iteru (‘river’ in Ancient Egyptian, used to refer to the Nile), and Nile arranged in tandem, with no special meaning whatsoever. This special move is a reference to a story mentioned by Herodotus in his The Histories (4th century BCE) in which Nitocris avenged the deaths of her brother and her husband by diverting the Nile to drown the murderers. It is also a water-based special attack, which ties in with her “summer swimsuit” outfit theme.

Ozymandias

As with Nitocris above, FGO went with the Greek name for this character. Ozymandias is none other than Ramesses II, or Ramesses the Great, that I mentioned above. Arguably one of the greatest pharaohs, Ramesses II was the third ruler of the 19th Dynasty in the New Kingdom; he reigned for 66 years in the 13th century BCE and lived to be 90 years old. He led numerous military campaigns to the Near East in the north and to Nubia in the south, and also established several treaties with neighboring nations.

Ramesses II was named after his grandfather; nine other pharaohs were named after Ramesses the Great (all belonging to the 20th Dynasty), a record among Egyptian rulers. He had two principal wives, Nefertari (more on her later) and Isetnofret, and six other great royal wives. According to most counts, Ramesses fathered around 90 to 100 children; this fact is alluded to in FGO, though they preferred to go with the more dramatic figure of “over a hundred”.

He was also a prodigious builder and during his reign numerous temples, monuments and even cities were built, a fact also mentioned in FGO. In all likelihood, Ramesses was trying to outdo Amenhotep III, the Pharaoh from the 18th Dynasty known as “The Magnificent”. The reign of Amenhotep III is considered the Golden Age of Egypt.

Most notably, he built the city of Pi-Ramesses (or Per-Ramesses) in the region of the Nile Delta to be the new capital. The

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\(^6\) Her brother is mentioned a few times in FGO, but doesn’t appear as far as I’m aware. But I missed the Assassin event.
name means “House of Ramesses”, so we can have an idea of how much he must have loved himself (a feature that is also shown in FGO). He also built a gigantic temple complex in Thebes known as Ramesseum. As his mortuary temple, the Ramesseum was a place to worship the deceased pharaoh and keep his memory alive for eternity.

And now to FGO. The game informs the players that Ozymandias is also known as Ramesses II and as Meryamen. The full royal titulary of pharaohs consisted of five names. The first name is called the Horus name. The second one is the Nebty name or Two Ladies name, indicating that the pharaoh was the lord of the two lands (Upper and Lower Egypt). Then there’s the Golden Horus name, possibly signifying the pharaoh’s eternal name. Then there’s the throne name (prenomen), which is the regnal name. And finally, there’s the personal name (nome), the name given at birth. Pharaohs are typically known to us by their personal name (followed by Roman ordinals, as standard for kings). The last two names are written inside a symbol called ‘cartouche’. The throne name of Ramesses II was User-maatre Setepenre; note that Ozymandias is the Greek rendition of the first part of this name. His personal name was Ramesses Meryamun (or Meryamen).

Ozymandias’ alignment is given as Chaotic Neutral in FGO. That is just wrong. A Pharaoh’s duty was to protect Egypt and its people from Chaos and to uphold *maat*, which is the Ancient Egyptian concept of truth, harmony (in the sense of balance or order), morality and justice. As I mentioned on my article about *Overwatch*’s Pharah (Salvador, 2016), a Pharaoh, and especially one such as Ramesses II, should unquestionably have a Lawful alignment. For more about pharaohs, their names, and their daily life at home or in battle, see Partridge (2002) and Shaw (2012).

The character design of Ozymandias failed to take into account one piece of in-

formation that is a favorite of the public: Ramesses was a redhead. We know that because of his mummy. His FGO incarnation is dark-haired, though I’ll venture saying it is better this way. Now let’s turn to Ozymandias’ outfit: it is completely absurd. Okay, that’s done. Next topic: eye make-up. Ozymandias (and also Nitocris, see above) uses the dark eyeliner that’s typical of Ancient Egypt since Predynastic times. The cosmetic is called kohl and was made by grinding sulfide-based minerals. It was worn by men and women and besides being fashionable, it supposedly protected the eye from the brunt of ultraviolet (UV) light, but that is still debated in academia. Kohl produced with galena (lead sulfide) could supposedly be toxic if absorbed by the skin, but this is also still hotly debated by researchers. Last but not least, new research points out that applying kohl might lead to an increase in the production of nitric oxide by the body, which is an antimicrobial agent (Mahmood et al., 2019).

His class is Rider, which is defined as a “mounted knight” or heroes capable of taming “any beast, be it mythical or mechanical”. The reason for Ozymandias being a rider is not apparent in FGO. At first it could be suspected that this choice was due to the prominent usage of chariots in Egyptian military in that time. However, he qualifies as a Rider due to his Noble Phantasm (not in FGO, see below) Mesektet, the Solar Barge. The Solar Barge is the ship in which the sun god Ra crossed the sky during the day and the Underworld during the night. The barge was called Atet or Mandjet; the name Mesektet was applied to it only during the night time.

Pharaoh Tutankhamun’s canopic coffinette (that held mummified internal organs like the liver); Valley of the Kings, 18th Dynasty, New Kingdom. Note the crook/heka with blue and golden stripes, like the one held by Ozymandias in FGO. Photo by D. Denisenkov (2012); image extracted and modified from Wikimedia Commons.

Ramesses II in his chariot during the Battle of Kadesh; relief from the Great Temple of Ramses II, Abu Simbel. Image extracted from Wikimedia Commons (Warren LeMay, 2019).
Scene from the papyrus of Her-Weben (21st Dynasty, Third Intermediate Period; now in Cairo Museum) showing the solar barque of Ra (seated), with the god Seth spearing the monstrous serpent Apep.

Ozymandias' actual Noble Phantasm in FGO is called Ramesseum Tentyris. The Shining Great Temple Complex. Indeed, as we saw above, the Ramesseum was a great temple complex and I suppose it looked very shiny back then. Tentyris is the Greek name of Dendera, a small town in the middle of Egypt. The thing is, the Ramesseum is not located there — it's in Thebes! Besides, the Noble Phantasm's animation shows a pyramid, which is not part of the Ramesseum.

FGO says the height of Ozymandias' reign was when Nefertari gave birth to the second prince. I'm not sure why FGO has chosen that point in time, because that's very early on (again, he had nearly 100 kids) and Ramesses II definitely achieved way more afterwards (even if we discount his blatant royal propaganda). Besides, the statement is just wrong in other accounts.

While the first prince (Amun-her-khepeshef) was a son of Nefertari, Isetnofret was the mother of the second prince (which was also named Ramesses). The second son of Nefertari was actually the third prince. His name was Pareherwenemef and we don't know much about him other than that he participated in the famous Battle of Kadesh and that he died before his two older brothers. You can learn more about Egyptian royalties in Dodson & Hilton (2010).

FGO goes with the trend of popular literature and cinema in considering Ramesses II to be the Pharaoh mentioned in the Bible's Exodus and, thus, a contemporary (and friend) of Moses (as seen in Fate/Prototype: Fragments of Sky Silver). Needless to say, Moses is a mythical figure, not a historical one, and thus, Ramesses II has nothing to do with Moses or with the likewise mythical Exodus (Dever, 2001; Meyers, 2005). In FGO, of course, one does not need to be real to be a Servant, so it's okay for Moses to exist there.

Nefertari

Alright, I know Nefertari is not a play-able Servant in FGO, but I think she deserves a section of her own here. After all, she is one of the most famous queens of Egypt (together with Nefertiti from the 18th Dynasty).

Nefertari was the first of Ramesses II's two Great Royal Wives; as we saw above, the other was Isetnofret. He married both before he ascended to the throne and likely when he was still in his teens. FGO goes with popular knowledge that Nefertari

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7 Misguidingly, this is also the name of Ozymandias' city in FGO's Sixth Singularity. It is neither the actual Tentyris nor does it make sense to live in your own funerary temple.

8 Dendera is famous for a temple complex that includes a beautiful Temple of Hathor, the goddess of fun stuff (music, love, sex, etc.).

9 Another of Ozymandias's Noble Phantasms (not in FGO) is the Abu el-Hol Sphinx. "Abu el-Hol" is a rendition of the modern Arabic name of the Great Sphinx of Giza. That's the large famous sphinx. It has nothing to do with Ramesses II, though. It was in all likelihood built by Pharaoh Khafre from the 4th Dynasty. The Sphinx appears in Ozymandias's Extra Attack animation in FGO.

was Ozymandias’ true love. She might as well have been according to the surviving evidence we have today (for instance, her amazing tomb in the Valley of the Queens is greater than the tomb of Ramesses himself). However, I should point out that there is comparatively fewer information about Isetnofret to judge her relative importance in this ancient waifu war.

In any event, Ramesses II sure went to great lengths for Nefertari. He built a magnificent temple for her in Abu Simbel right beside his own temple (see above). In that temple, Nefertari was the personification of the goddess Hathor. There, Ramesses II wrote the following dedication text: “A temple of great and mighty monuments, for the Great Royal Wife Nefertari Meryetmut, for whose sake the very Sun does shine” (translation by Kitchen, 1996). If that doesn’t make Ozymandias a strong contender for best husbando of the Fateverse, I don’t know what would.

That is appropriate, given that Hathor was the consort of Horus in most accounts. And the Pharaoh, of course, was identified as an incarnation of Horus on Earth. In Fate, Ozymandias also likens Nefertari to Hathor.

Of the Nasuverse, actually.
Façade of the Small Temple at Abu Simbel; image extracted and modified from Wikimedia Commons (J. Bon, 2008).

A painting from the tomb of Sennefer (Thebes, 18th Dynasty), showing the deceased with offerings and lotus flowers; image extracted from OsirisNet (www.osirisnet.net).

Nefertari was highly educated and was involved in court and foreign diplomatic matters. So, in all likelihood, she was a more active and integral part of the government than most other queens. References to that have been found in documents from Near East kingdoms. She died in 1,255 BCE, 42 years before her husband.

In the Fate franchise, Nefertari appears in flashbacks from her early years, from the times she and Ozymandias spent with the (mythical) Moses (Fate/Prototype: Fragments of Sky Silver). She wears a white dress, as expected, and has pinkish lotus flowers adorning her hair (Ozymandias’ final ascension artwork also shows him holding one of those flowers). In Ancient Egypt, lotus flowers were symbols of the sun, creation and renewal and they appear in numerous paintings and reliefs, especially in scenes depicting offerings.

There are two main species of lotus in Egypt: *Nymphaea lotus* (white lotus) and *Nymphaea caerulea* (blue lotus). Some flowers of the white lotus can actually be tinged with pink on the “underside” of the petals, but nothing as dramatic as the ones seen in Fate. There is a third, reddish/pink lotus (*Nelumbo nucifera*) that was introduced in Egypt from Persia. But that happened during the Late Period, way after the time of Ramesses.

**Darius III**

Well, this is not an Egyptian character. Rather, he was the last king of the Achaemenid Empire of Persia. However, the Persians had conquered Egypt before Darius III’s time, so he was by default the Pharaoh from 336–332 BCE, the last ruler of the “31st Dynasty”. The local governors (satraps) who ruled Egypt under Darius III were called Sabaces (died in 333 BCE) and Mazaces. The latter was very quick to surrender the country when Alexander arrived (see below).

In FGO, Darius III belongs to the Berserker class. I won’t discuss him further here, because he is not an Egyptian character per se and I have no expertise in Persia. However, I’ll venture saying that the Servant definitely doesn’t look like the real Darius III did.
Alexander

Okay, not Egyptian again, I know. Alexander the Great, is famous due to his large military campaign, conquests, and the effect (for good or ill) he had in the subsequent history of the world. As such, I won’t extend myself about his life and curriculum, but I have to give some background about the important role he played in Ancient Egypt.

Alexander reached Persian-dominated Egypt in 332 BCE. The satrap Mazaces just handed the country over to Alexander, who was received by the people as a liberator. I assume that by then, the people of Egypt must have been sick and tired of the Persians. Alexander was even proclaimed son of the god Amun by the oracle of Siwa Oasis.

Alexander was the Pharaoh of Egypt from 332 to his death in 323 BCE, though he stayed only a short period in Egypt, of course. While he was there, he founded the city of Alexandria on the Mediterranean coast, following the Hellenistic style. Alexandria later became the capital of Egypt under Ptolemaic rule (and Roman and Byzantine as well). It was also a learning and cultural center during the Ptolemaic era, with the first museum ever built (known as the Musaeum or Mouseion) and its famous library. But what is ‘Ptolemaic’ anyway?

After Alexander died, his extensive empire was divided between his closest companions. Ptolemy was one of Alexander’s most trusted generals. He managed to get control of Egypt, became pharaoh, and started the Ptolemaic Dynasty. Ptolemy I was Macedonian Greek and brought lots of elements of Hellenistic culture to Egypt. Though Ptolemy adhered to the ancient Egyptian model of government and supported local customs and culture to some extent, part of the Egyptian traditions and laws were superseded by Hellenistic ones. Several cultural aspects also became merged and syncretized.

Ptolemy I was succeeded by a number of other Ptolemies. From Ptolemy IV onwards, the kingdom declined, with local rebellions, a good amount of manga-like incest, and Hollywood-like family rivalries, betrayal and murder. If you think Game of Thrones

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12 For more on Amun, see my article about Persona (Salvador, 2015).

13 You can find a nice reconstruction of Alexandria in Assassin’s Creed Origins (Ubisoft, 2017).
had plenty of those, you know nothing — about the Ptolemaic era, that is. You can check the book by Hölbl (2001) to learn more.

Well, enough with that and back to FGO. There are two Servants based on Alexander: the first one is the boy Alexander and the second one is the adult Iskandar (that’s the eastern/Persian rendition of the name). Both Servants appropriately belong to the Rider class and at first glance, have a rather generic anime look. However, the skin color is in line with his Mediterranean origin and there is a sort of popular idea that Alexander had red hair, and FGO’s Servants follow suit. The only color depiction of Alexander, however, shows him with dark hair (see Fildes & Fletcher, 2004 for a full dossier on Alexander). The hair style of Iskandar (minus the beard) is actually in line with depictions of the real Alexander, who wears it in a so-called anastole style, with a central upsweep. In fact, Iskandar’s design could have actually been based on that famous color depiction of Alexander from Pompeii, though he is clearly a buffed-up version of the original.

Alexander the Great. Detail from a mosaic of the House of the Faun, Pompeii, ca. 100 BCE; public domain.

Alexander and Iskandar carry a sword that should be Macedonian in design. The size is about right for a xiphos but the design, with its long and narrow hilt (or grip, to be more precise) and the somewhat triangular blade, is a bit off. Young Alexander’s Noble Phantasm is Bucephalus, which is just the name of Alexander’s horse. Iskandar’s regular sprite already shows him mounted on Bucephalus and his Noble Phantasm is called Ionioi Hetairoi, or Ionian Companions. The hetairoi (companions) were the elite cavalry of the Macedonian army, though no one is riding horses in the Noble Phantasm animation.

Cleopatra

Cleopatra (Stages 1 and 3). Art by Komatsuzaki Rui.

The last Pharaoh of the Ptolemies was Cleopatra VII, which is the one known simply as Cleopatra to us due to the numerous books, films, etc. All these popular entertainment media have twisted Cleopatra’s history and character so much that they became almost free of historical facts. So, let’s start with a simple request: please forget all the femme fatale nonsense you’ve seen; that was all spun by old insecure male scholars. Now let’s explore actual facts known about the last Pharaoh.14

She was born in 69 BCE, daughter of Ptolemy XII and, in all likelihood, an Egyptian priestess. That means Cleopatra was actually part Egyptian, in contrast to the other Ptolemaic rulers. Supposedly, her mother taught Cleopatra about Egyptian culture and that’s the reason why the future Pharaoh had so much knowledge of and respect for it — yet another stark contrast to her predecessors. She studied and attended lectures at Alexandria’s Musaeum and was

14 Cleopatra’s biographies by Roller (2010) and Fletcher (2008) are good reads if you’re interested in learning more.
a published medical authority, having authored a work that we know as *Cosmet- ics*, preserved only as fragments. Despite the interpretation such name might have today, Cleopatra’s work was medical and pharmacological in nature, dealing with remedies and prescriptions, and weights and measures. She could also read and write several languages and was extremely knowledgeable regarding Egyptian, Greek and Roman history.

Cleopatra was originally the second in line to the throne, but by the time her father died, her elder sister Berenike IV had already been executed. Thus, Cleopatra became Pharaoh jointly with her younger brother Ptolemy XIII, as there was opposition towards a woman ruling alone. Soon, a civil war broke between the siblings: Julius Caesar arrived and had a hand in settling the war: Ptolemy XIII died during the conflict and Cleopatra became the sole ruler. As Pharaoh, Cleopatra VII started to stabilize and rebuild Egypt.

She had a son with Caesar, who was named Caesarion. After Caesar’s death, she tried to have her son accepted in Rome as his heir, which would make him a very powerful figure. The Romans, however, would have none of it and she failed. She then allied herself with those who would avenge Caesar’s death: Octavian (Caesar’s grand-nephew) and Antonius (a.k.a. Mark Antony). Antonius worked with Cleopatra to make Egypt a beacon of stability in the Near-East, helping to expand its territories. During that time, Cleopatra and Antonius had twins, and yet another child later on.

After a complete failure in the Parthian War, Antonius deemed he could not return to Rome and went to live with Cleopatra in Alexandria. In Egypt, Cleopatra officially recognized Antonius as her husband, and their children as heirs, which did not sit well with Octavian, then the sole ruler in Rome. Most of the popular tales about Cleopatra regarding her personality and lifestyle sprouted in that period, as Roman propaganda gathered all the empire’s prejudices against foreigners and women to target her.

Octavian also saw himself as Caesar’s heir and did not recognize Caesarion. All of this led to war and eventually Octavian invaded Egypt. Antonius committed suicide and Octavian captured Cleopatra, who had tried to flee while leaving Caesarion on the throne. With that, the Egyptian Empire finally fell and became a part of Rome. Cleopatra did not want to be paraded as a trophy in Rome and this led her to committing suicide. That is far from being confirmed, though, as she could have as easily been dispatched by Octavian and/or his men. Legends say that she committed suicide through a self-inflicted snakebite, a story that has become solidified in Cleopatra folklore.

Cleopatra’s modern Western clothes in FGO (Stages 1 and 2) might be due to her perceived status as a *femme fatale* by the public (and hence, designers). As Levy (2006) has argued, the “Westernesque femme fatale” of Japanese literature (and naturally, we can add pop culture to that) typically has a modern Western appearance and behavior. In a nice twist, FGO recognizes that this vision of Cleopatra is distorted and the game informs the player that Cleopatra’s appearance as a Servant is due to the baseless rumors about how “that devilish woman seduced the Roman generals” (Fate/Grand Order Wikia, 2020). Her Stage 3 costume is

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15 Cleopatra VII is also a character in *Assassin’s Creed Origins*, so I was planning on writing about her for the next part of my “The scientists of Assassin’s Creed” series. See Salvador (2019) for the first part about James Cook and Charles Darwin.

16 Recipes for soaps and hair dyes are also attributed to Cleopatra.

17 He’s also a Servant in FGO, though I won’t talk about him here.

18 Thus, one could argue that Caesarion was in fact the last Pharaoh, a fact that is even recognized by FGO. However, given that he never actually ruled alone, we can disregard that idea.
a pleated white dress, which is more in line with what we know of Egyptian clothing; even so, she retains the high heels.

Cléopâtre et César (Cleopatra and Caesar), oil on canvas by Jean-Léon Gérôme, 1866 (image extracted from Wikimedia Commons; public domain). This painting is considered a classic example of Egyptomania by experts, but I suppose we can consider it a 19th-century example of Rule 34 by a French painter.

Portrait of Cleopatra on the obverse of a 40 drachms coin (ca. 51-30 BCE, Alexandria); image extracted from Wikimedia Commons (O. Nickl, 2017).

We do not know what Cleopatra looked like, as the only remaining “portraits” are those found in coinage. We only know a few things: that she was rather short; had a prominent nose (supposedly a family trait); and that the quote that she was unattractive is actually false, a misquote from Plutarch’s original.

Cleopatra’s sprite includes a large golden cobra. That could be a reference to the suicide of the legends, but it could also just be a reasonable usage of one of the most powerful and pervasive symbols of protection of Ancient Egypt, especially related to pharaohs. A rearing cobra can be found on the nemes headdress of the king; it is called uraeus (see the photo of the golden mask of Tutankhamun’s mummy above and the discussion on her Noble Phantasm below). The cobra was also typically related to Wadjet, the tutelary goddess of Lower Egypt, but it could also be used to represent other goddesses, such as Neith and Meretseger.

Cleopatra (Stage 3 sprite).

Her Noble Phantasm is called “Uraeus Astrape” and includes a giant fiery cobra and a direct mention to the uraeus. Astrape is the goddess (or rather, the personification) of lightning in Ancient Greece, so I have no idea why that’s part of the name of Cleopatra’s Noble Phantasm, especially because it’s not a lightning-themed special attack.

Cleopatra belongs to the Assassin class in FGO, a choice that might be related to the femme fatale thing mentioned above. Cleopatra herself mentions in FGO that she doesn’t...
know why she’s an Assassin, given she never killed anyone. For what we know, she could have been a Rider, as she was skilled in horseback riding and hunting, as all royals were, and also a great naval commander. Or she could have been a Ruler, given that she was a remarkable one. As Roller (2010: 2) puts it: “descended from at least two companions of Alexander the Great, she had more stature than the Romans whom she opposed.” As Egypt’s ruler, Cleopatra worked hard to salvage a dying kingdom (which was in a precarious state due to the incompetence of her predecessors) and to stand up to Rome — and she nearly succeeded. She was almost a messianic figure in the eastern Mediterranean, who represented the possibility of a future without Roman domination. Just imagine how different the world could have been if a female Pharaoh had defeated Rome in its early days.

The Egyptian cobra, *Naja haje*; image extracted from iNaturalist (observation #32149684, by Alex Ville, 2019).

**FINAL THOUGHTS**

Overall, FGO’s Egypt-inspired characters are actually reasonable representations, even though they draw a lot from the “lore” of Egyptomania’s past. I suppose it’s understandable that historians and other scholars dislike the fact that King Arthur and Miyamoto Musashi were transformed into waifus.¹⁹ But I think that the *Fate* franchise — and FGO in particular, given its proportions — can actually help to increase interest in topics that are otherwise mostly academic. Many players will want to know more about their favorite characters and will inevitably end up reading about those historical, mythological and literary figures. If that’s not a good way to make people interested in History, Archaeology, Mythology and/or Literature, then I don’t know what is.

And now I’m gonna go on a limb here and imagine you, my dear reader, will want to learn more about Ancient Egypt. You’ve made it this far, after all, which is a good sign. In that case, the book by Silverman (2003) is a very accessible and thorough introduction. If you fall in love with Ancient Egypt like I did and the time comes when you want more hardcore academic books, Shaw (2004) and Kemp (2007) will be good starting points.

**REFERENCES**


¹⁹ Not to mention the global academic and legal discussions about the evils of the gacha mechanic of FGO and so many other games (see for instance, Hood, 2017; Wiltshire, 2017; Drummond & Sauer, 2018).


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Figure credits

The images of Fate characters used herein were extracted from Fate/Grand Order Wiki, with the exception of Nefertari, extracted from TYPE-MOON Wiki; ©Aniplex.

About the author

Dr. Rodrigo Salvador is a zoologist and paleontologist who studies snails; or a malacologist, if you will. Nevertheless, he has dabbled quite a bit in Egyptology and often writes about geek culture topics featuring Ancient Egyptian stuff. Ozymandias and Cleopatra are on his top 5 Servants list, though the gacha gods haven’t allowed him to summon them yet. Rate up is a lie!