

Incredible Insects

AFTER 1: Historically Cultured Insects

After your visit to explore insects in ancient history. Just like today, people of the ancient world had complex relationships with insects. Some were considered pests, some inspired mythology, and some were economically important. Students demonstrate understanding of how insect form influences behavior and the characteristics of an ancient culture by creating a “product” that would have been utilized in that culture.

VA Standards Addressed

English/Language Arts (2024): 2.RI.1; 3.RI.1

Science (2018): 2.1 f; 3.1; f

History/Social Science (2015): 3.2; 3.3; 3.4

Materials

- At least one set of 25 Appendix B: Historical Insect Cards ([Appendix B](#)) that identify ways in which insects and other invertebrates were used in the ancient cultures of Mali, Egypt, China, Greece, and Rome.

Background

Ancient Egypt, Greece, Rome, and China have rich written histories, while the Empire of Mali utilized a more oral history tradition. The former cultures also worked extensively in stone and metal to produce art, while Ancient Mali used more textile, wood, and other biodegradable substances. As a result, I found it difficult to identify insects in the culture of Ancient Mali. The folklore and use of insects presented in this lesson are from oral histories and current cultures of the peoples who now occupy the territory of Ancient Mali, and have likely been passed down through the ages.

Lesson Preparation

1. Select a grouping system that works for your students. Each student could get one card, then move around the room to compare with others, pairs could get packs of a few cards, or small groups could each get their own set.

Instructional Strategy

1. Students read the cards to learn about how insects were used in ancient cultures. Compare between cultures: was the same insect viewed the same way in each culture? Do some kinds of insects come up again and again?
2. Sort the ways that insects were used. Possible categories can include: as pieces of art, in religious ceremonies, as myths to explain the world, as economic value (used to create a product or used for food). You may wish to have students explain their sorts and to propose moving insects from one category to another.
3. Students then choose an insect that they have become curious about during the course of the unit to create a product that could have been used in Ancient China, Greece, Rome, Egypt, or Mali.
 - a. The student needs to be able to justify 1. why the product would have been used by that particular culture, and 2. what attributes of the insect make it appropriate for the product.



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Appendix B: Historical Insect Cards

Ancient Chinese saw cicadas as a symbol of cycles. They saw them come out of the ground, shed their exoskeleton, and the fresh adult spread its new wings. Cicadas were eaten as a special treat during the nymph stage of the life cycle, and one species of cicada was used for medicine! Nymphs are still eaten and the medicine is still made today!



A jade cicada used in ancient Chinese [funerals](#)



Deep fried larvae of cicadas from modern central China. [Photo by Xiangrui Huang.](#)



The black and scarlet cicada used to make medicine. It is also used to make red and yellow dye. [Photo by Shipher](#)



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Since the time of Ancient China, silk has been made from the cocoons of *Bombyx Mori* moths, a species that **ONLY** eats mulberry leaves! The larvae (caterpillars) are usually called silkworms.

A worker unwinds the cocoons while machines spin the fibers into thread. [Photo by Airman 1st Class Amber Ashcraft](#)



A silkworm caterpillar makes silk to spin its cocoon as it enters the pupa part of its life cycle.

[Photo by Baishiya](#)



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In ancient China, a praying mantis symbolized cruelty and mystery.

Praying mantis jade carving from Ancient China. [Photo by Galerie Zacke](#)



Starting in Ancient China, people kept crickets and katydids in cages to enjoy their songs and to bring good luck.



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The ancient Chinese calendar was divided into 24 “months” based on patterns of the sun. The third was called “Jing-Zhe” (惊蛰) which means “the waking of the insects”. Farmers knew that when insects started to wake up from winter, it was time to plow the fields!



A collection of carved scarab jewels

Ancient Egyptians watched the sun roll across the sky and watched scarab beetle roll dung across the ground. Every night the sun went down, like a beetle into the ground. Every morning the sun came up, like new beetles hatching from the ball of dung. Because of this, they used scarab beetles as the symbol for Ra, the sun god.



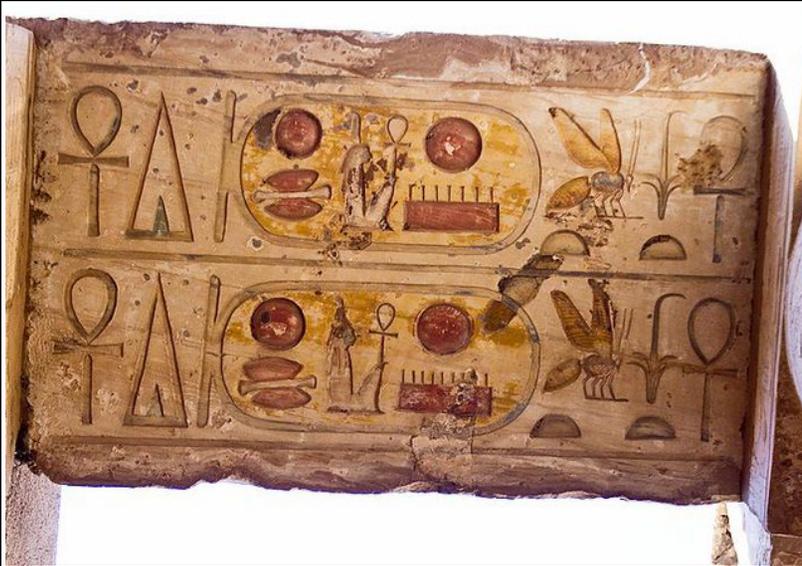
[Beetle photo by Bernard Dupont](#)



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In ancient Egyptian mythology, bees formed from the tears of the sun god Ra.

[Photo by Chris Beckett](#)



The ancient Egyptian “Order of the Golden Fly” was a military honor. They watched horseflies bite fiercely, and to keep coming back, and though that such bravery was good for soldiers.

Replica golden fly medals from the belongings of Queen Ahhotep I



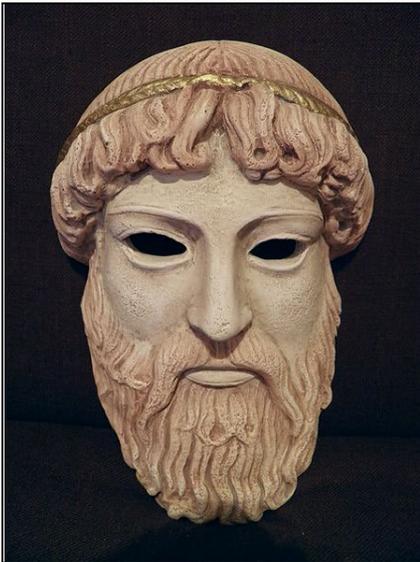
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Mantises were shown in the ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead as gods who led souls to the underworld.

Hieroglyph of a mantis [Photo by Francis Dzikowski](#).

[Mantis photo by Ivan Radic](#)



In ancient Greece, scarabs AND eagles were both symbols for Zeus, king of the gods. Greek storyteller Aesop wrote the fable of the eagle, scarab, Zeus, and the hare.



The emblem of the eagle and the beetle, from Andrea Alciato's *Emblemata Liber* (1534)



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The honeybee was a sacred symbol for Artemis, goddess of the hunt, animals, and the moon.

This silver coin is from Ephesos, city of Artemis.

These statues of Artemis are decorated with bees.



Eos and Tithonus



The ancient Greek goddess Eos, goddess of the moon, begged Zeus to make the man she loved live forever. Zeus granted her wish, but she didn't ask for Tithonus to stay young forever. Eventually he grew so old, he shrunk into the first cicada.

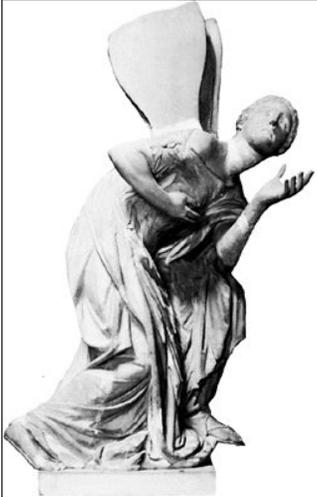
Poets and musicians wrote poems and songs based on the sounds of cicadas.



Ancient Greek cicada coin



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Moths and butterfly wings were the symbol for Psyche, ancient Roman goddess of the soul.

Mosaic in which Psyche steals the bow of Eros, located in the Hatay Archaeology Museum, Antakya

Classical sculpture located in the Louvre museum, Paris



Locusts are very large, very hungry grasshoppers that can destroy crops. In one Greek myth, Hercules drove away a cloud of locusts from Mount Oeta.

Locust swarm

The sounds of locusts and crickets also inspired poets and musicians. These medallions honor their sound.



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Ancient Roman nobles ate beetle larvae as a special treat.



Image of guacamole with marlin, Parmesan, pomegranate and chicuicuil worms from Punto MX restaurant in Madrid, Spain.



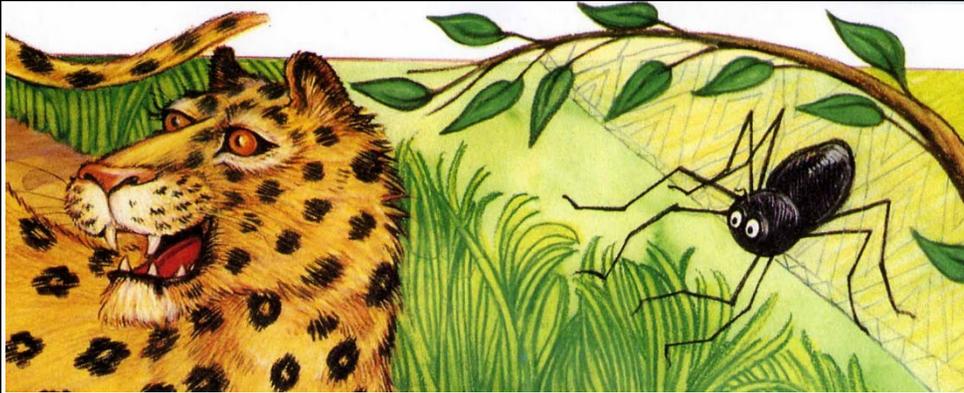
Ancient Romans and Greeks used insects that eat the sap of oak trees to make a bright red dye.



The Coronation Mantle of Roger II of Sicily, silk dyed with kermes and embroidered with gold thread and pearls. Royal Workshop, Palermo, Sicily, 1133–34. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.



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[Anansi and the jaguar by Janice Skivington](#)

Anansi is a trickster from the myths of the Ancient Mali that looks like a spider and plays jokes on other animals.



Anansi the Spider: A Tale from the Ashanti by Gerald McDermott



Wild silkworm cocoons were collected by the Ancient Mali to make silk fabric. Empty cocoons were also filled with pebbles and turned into dancing rattles.

Modern Madagascar silk, image from the UN Sericultural commission



<http://inserco.org/en/madagascar>



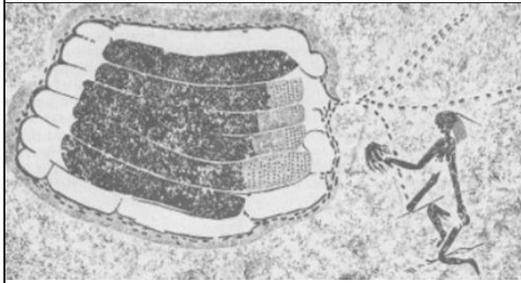
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Oko, was the ancient Mali god of agriculture. Bees were his messengers. Honey is still an important food in Africa today!

Traditional beehive in the Province of Ouham, Central African Republic ([Photo: Bruno Bokoto de Semboli](#))

Shaman with deer/bee face, 6,000-9,000 B.C.E.



This ancient rock painting from Zimbabwe depicts a person smoking out a beehive. (Image © the International Bee Research Association, www.ibra.org.uk)



Tassili Cave Drawing (Northern Algeria)
Drawn by Kat Harrisson McKenna from photograph by Lajoux (1961)



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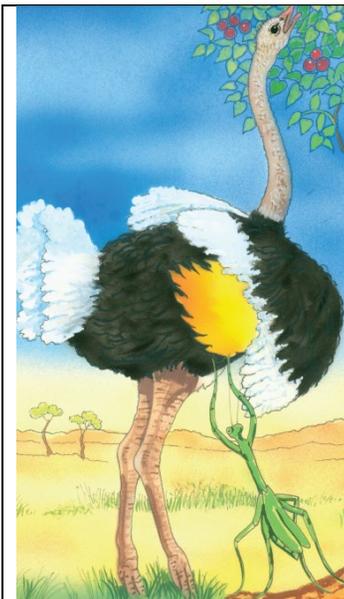
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An ancient Mali saying calls bagworms “the one who collects wood, but sleeps in the cold”, because they build cocoons out of sticks that look like firewood.

[Bagworm](#) from Johannesburg, South Africa

[Ugandan women carrying firewood](#), photo by Museruka Emmanuel



An ancient Mali myth says that praying mantis stole fire from ostrich and shared it with humans.

Fire Myths: Mantis Steals Fire from Ostrich, [Scholastic poster resource](#)

[Photo: BBC Earth](#)

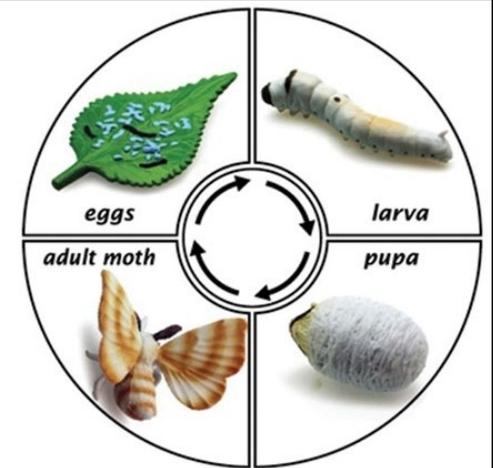


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[Zu/'hoasi women of the Western Kalahara Southern Africa in the Caterpillar Dance](#)

The Ancient Mali used cocoons as symbols for girls growing up, and women would dance together like a wiggling caterpillar. The life cycle of a butterfly was a symbol for adulthood. Both are still used today!



[Life cycle of a silkworm moth](#)



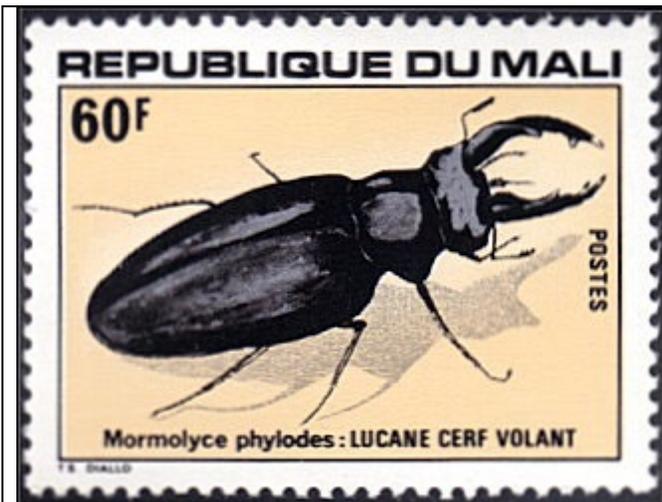
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In Ancient Mali butterfly masks (Yehoti) were used to ask the gods for growth during spring months.



[Butterfly mask](#). Nuna peoples, Burkina Faso (National Museum of African Art) Modern agricultural techniques in Mali. [Photo by Anastasia Sogodogo/USAID](#)



“He has a beetle in his head” is an ancient Mali saying that means someone is acting strangely.

[Modern Mali postage stamp](#)



[Mali postage stamp from 1967](#)

