

WCMA Egyptian Art Module

Glossary of Terms

Amulets: small objects worn or carried for protection that could take a variety of symbolic forms such as animals, tools, eyes, or other body parts. The power of an amulet came from its symbolic shape, a spell or inscription written on it, and the color of the material (e.g. green represented rebirth). Amulets were also placed in mummy's wrappings to insure a good afterlife for the deceased.

Ba: part of the soul that made up your personality. It was believed that the *ba* was able to travel around after death, but it had to return to the mummy in order to survive. In art, the *ba* is depicted as a human-headed bird.

BCE: Before the Common Era. A non-religious notation for dates before the year 1 in the Gregorian calendar.

The Book of the Dead: one of the most important texts in Egyptian funerary rituals, containing over 200 chapters. The spells from the Book of the Dead were meant to guide and protect the deceased on the journey to the afterlife. Not originally made in book format, the texts were inscribed on amulets, papyri, shabtis, coffins, and the mummy wrappings themselves. Egyptians called it *The Book of Coming Forth by Day*.

CE: Common Era. A non-religious notation for dates after the year 1 BCE in the Gregorian calendar.

Crook and Flail: important symbols of the Egyptian pharaoh. The crook, or shepherd's staff, represented the pharaoh's role as the protector of the Egyptian people. The flail, which was used to thresh grain, represented the Pharaoh's disciplinary role.

Djed Pillar: an amulet representing strength and stability. It was usually placed on a mummy's throat and chest. It is unclear what it was meant to represent; some people think it is a palm tree, others think it is Osiris's backbone.

Faience: a sandy mixture of crushed quartz, natron, and pigment that was heated to fuse the ingredients together.

Ka: vital life-force and another part of the soul. The *ka* continued to live after death and returned to inhabit the mummy. Tombs were known as "the house of the *ka*" and usually included household objects for the *ka* to use and offerings of food for the *ka* to eat.

Lower Egypt: the Delta region in northern Egypt, near the Mediterranean Sea. It was represented by the Red Crown of Lower Egypt.

Maat: the concept of divine order established by the gods, represented by a feather. Maat was also the name of a goddess personifying truth and cosmic order. When a person died, his heart was weighed on a scale against a *maat* feather. If the two were equal, it meant the person had led good life and would be granted access to the afterlife.

Middle Kingdom: the period of Egyptian history lasting from the Eleventh Dynasty to the Fourteenth Dynasty (2080 BCE – 1640 BCE). It began when Mentuhotep II reunified Egypt and became the first

pharaoh of the Middle Kingdom. Pyramids continued to be built, but were much smaller than Old Kingdom pyramids.

Mummy: a body preserved artificially, usually by embalming. During the process of mummification, the internal organs were usually removed, and the body was soaked in natron, a type of salt. Then, the body was wrapped in strips of linen. Priests oversaw the mummification process, reciting spells of protection over the dead to insure a safe journey in the underworld. Ancient Egyptians believed that your soul lived on after death and needed the body to survive. It was your soul's anchor to the physical world and allowed you to receive the offerings left in your tomb. Egyptians also mummified their pets so that they could live together in the afterlife.

New Kingdom: the period of Egyptian history from the Eighteenth to the Twentieth Dynasties (1550 BCE – 1069 BCE). This was a very prosperous time in ancient Egypt, and pharaohs built many religious temples and tombs.

The Nile River: a river in Egypt and possibly the longest river in the world. Farming depended on the Nile's annual cycle of flooding. The flooding water deposited river silt on the fields, which acted as fertilizer.

Old Kingdom: the period of Egyptian history from the Third to the Sixth Dynasties (2686 BCE – 2181 BCE). Also known as "the Pyramid Age" because many pyramids were built during this time period. This was when the Great Pyramid of Giza was constructed.

Papyrus: a tall sedge (a reed-like plant) that grows in water. The Egyptians used the papyrus plant to make paper, baskets, sandals, and other objects. Egypt exported papyrus paper until the twelfth century CE.

Pharaoh: the ruler of ancient Egypt. His outfit usually included a crown (like the double crown of Upper and Lower Egypt), the crook and flail, a wig and false beard, a kilt, and armloads of jewelry. Although pharaohs were usually male, there were several female pharaohs. The most famous was Hatshepsut (reigned 1479 – 1458 BCE), who was often depicted wearing male clothing, including a false beard!

Pyramid: a large, triangular-shaped tomb made of stone, used by Egyptian royalty. The shape of the pyramid may represent a ramp leading up to heaven. Originally, the sides of the pyramid were covered in white limestone and the tip of the pyramid was covered in gold. The Great Pyramid of Khufu was the largest pyramid ever built by the ancient Egyptians. It was one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World and the only Wonder still in existence.

Sarcophagus: a container for the mummy's coffin, made of wood or stone. The coffin was placed in a sarcophagus to protect it. The sarcophagus was originally a simple rectangle shape but later developed into a more elaborate cartouche-shape (human-shaped). The outside and inside were both decorated with text and images, like the images of Nephthys and Isis, which protected the mummy.

Scarabs: popular amulets shaped like beetles. The scarab beetle as a symbol of life, death, and rebirth in eternal life. A scarab amulet inscribed with one's name was thought to ensure rebirth in eternal life in paradise.

Shawabti: small figurines shaped like mummies. Shawabtis were placed in graves as stand-ins for the deceased and were supposed to labor in the fields of Osiris. They were made of wax, wood, clay, hard stone like granite, but most often of faience. Some are highly decorated, although most have only an inscription. Shawabti inscriptions are usually the following verse from the Book of the Dead, chapter 6: "O *shawabti*, allotted to me, if I am summoned or if I am ordered to do any work that has to be done in the realm of the dead; or if any unpleasant tasks are imposed for me there as a duty, you shall present yourself for me on every occasion, to cultivate the fields, to irrigate the riverbanks, to ferry sand from the east to the west. "Here I am," you shall say." (Brooklyn Museum)

The Sun: an important symbol of resurrection in Egypt. It was believed that the sun was born (sunrise) and died (sunset), but would rise again the next day. After death, pharaohs joined the sun god's daily journey across the sky.

Tomb: the place where the deceased is buried. The most famous Egyptian tombs are the pyramids, which were only used for royalty. The tomb was the eternal home for the deceased person, so the tomb usually included furniture, food, and anything else the deceased might need in the afterlife.

Upper Egypt: the region located in southern Egypt. It is represented by the White Crown of Upper Egypt.

Wedjet Eye: a famous and popular amulet, shaped like an eye. It is also known as the eye of Horus. The wedjet eye granted protection from evil and was often found in mummy wrappings.

Sources

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