

WHAT'S YOUR IMPRESSION?

An Ancient Egyptian Seal?

What an unassuming object. A small piece of clay stamped with some hieroglyphs. What could this little thing tell us about funerary beliefs in ancient Egypt? Well, quite a lot if we chose to listen.

The Materials

The object is only 1.3cm by 2.8cm by 0.8cm and it made from clay. The impression is 1.1cm by 1.8cm. A visual examination would suggest Egyptian clay, however without further analysis it is impossible to know more (Zinn, Pers Comm). There are no signs of damage or makings of any kind other than the impression.

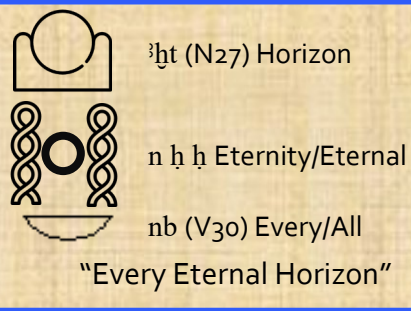


Actual Size



The Hieroglyphs

The hieroglyphs, though simple in form, are difficult to translate. The most likely translation is



ḥt (N27) Horizon

n h Eternity/Eternal

nb (V30) Every/All

"Every Eternal Horizon"

"Every Eternal Horizon", a blessing or prayer for a deceased person to experience eternal rebirth (Zinn, Pers Comm). The most significant feature

of the hieroglyphs is the bilateral symmetry, a common feature in Egyptian iconography (Sparavigna, 2016:34).

The Making

The most informative aspect of this object is the process in which it was made. Understanding the way in which it was made may shed some insight into why it was made (Knappett, 2010: 5). At present it is hard to place this object into the topography of Egyptology. If it was a mould, it would be deeper and the hieroglyphs more distinct. If it was a seal, we would expect some evidence of the container it was sealing. This object was made by someone holding a small piece of clay between thumb and forefinger, and making an impression from another object. It was made to be what it is.



A Mould?

This object is not typical for a mould as it is quite shallow. However, there is evidence that faience moulds could be shallow. Examination of a shallow mould, unprovenanced but likely from the Amarna period, revealed a faience residue (Boyce, 1989: 165).

A clay Ring Bezel Mould from The Fitzwilliam Museum (E.GA.3605.1943). Bearing the cartouche of Akhenaten. From the New Kingdom.

<https://collection.beta.fitz.ms/id/object/58034>



Ring Bezel Mould from The Met Fifth Avenue (66.99.161). Bearing the cartouche of Tutankhamun. From the New Kingdom.

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/558352>

Gold Signet ring from The Met Fifth Avenue (22.9.3). Inscribed with the prenomen of Tutankhamun in the centre and "Beloved of Amun, Lord of Eternity" on the sides. From the New Kingdom.

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/549200>



An Impression?

The impression is slightly curved, which could suggest an impression created by rolling an object, such as a ring, onto the wet clay. Stirrup rings from the New Kingdom are of a similar size and design as this impression.

An Egyptian gilt bronze stirrup ring from the New Kingdom. The inscription reads "Long live Khonsu, Lord of Eternity".

<https://www.bonhams.com/auctions/20021/lot/48/>



What can we say? It is made from Egyptian clay and, though small, it is complete. The inscription suggests a blessing for the afterlife, placing the object within the funerary sphere. Comparative examples would suggest the object dates from the New Kingdom.

What's your impression?



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Reference List

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