

Amulet of Becoming

The winged scarab in as a symbol of transformation in ancient Egyptian funerary belief

Introduction

This study examines an object identified as a fragment of a scarab amulet, analysing its form, material, and comparative examples to determine its history and symbolic importance within the context of ancient Egyptian funerary beliefs. The analysis investigates how the object’s iconography reflects broader themes of transformation, rebirth, and divine protection, which were central to Egyptian concepts of death and the afterlife.

Collection History

Part of a collection of Egyptian amulets held by Cyfarthfa Castle Museum in Merthyr Tydfil, the scarab fragment is displayed strung with other similar items, a modification made after acquisition. Little is known about the provenance of the objects. The collector Major Harry Hartley Waite Southey died in 1917 before he could complete the artefacts journal to accompany his collection.

Object Photographs



Comparative Objects



30.8.1082a-c
ca. 664–332 B.C.



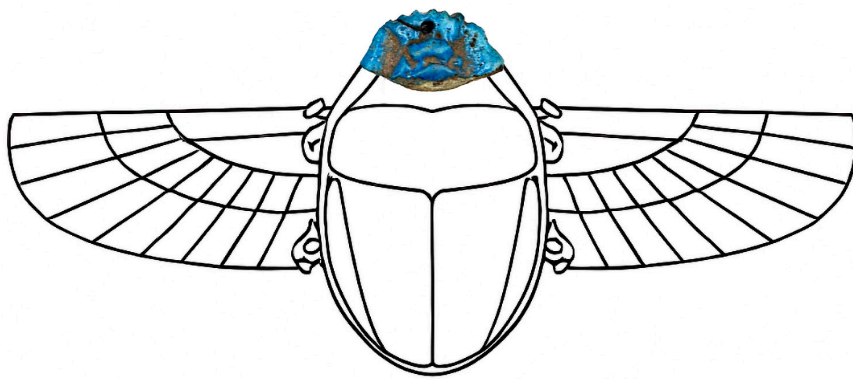
89.2.388
ca. 1070–664 B.C.



30.8.1083a-c
ca. 664–30 B.C.

Research Findings

The object’s shallow depth and lack of reverse inscription excludes it as a seal or commemorative scarab. Along with a pre-glaze piercing at the top and a break along the lower edge (likely where other holes once were), these features suggest the fragment was part of a winged scarab amulet. Comparative analysis supports this interpretation.



Object Report

Typology	Fragment of a scarab amulet
Material	Faience (glazed ceramic composition)
Manufacture	Mould-made; fine turquoise-blue glaze
Period	Likely Third Intermediate Period-Late Period 1070–332 B.C.
Dimensions	Height:24.2 mm Width:13.7 mm Depth:6.8 mm
Condition	Fragmentary; surface worn and pitted; glaze partially degraded; edges abraded; significant dirt deposits, stable overall
Morphological Features	Scarabeaus scarab type. Anterior section (clypeus, plates, eyes and head); notched clypeus; no base plate or inscription

Amulet Function & Placement

In ancient Egypt, amulets were worn by both the living and the dead, granting the wearer magical power and divine protection. Winged scarabs were sewn into mummy wrappings or a beaded shroud during priest-led funerary rites, where recited spells activated their protective power for the afterlife.



Fig 1: Suppl. 5291
Beaded Shroud

Scarab Significance in Funerary Beliefs

Scarab iconography features prominently in ancient Egyptian art and material culture. The scarab’s behaviour and life cycle reflect important religious ideas of rebirth, regeneration, and the cyclical nature of $\text{n}^{\text{h}}\text{h}$ (eternal time), observed in the rising and setting of the sun and annual Nile flooding:

- The beetle’s daily rolling of the dung ball mirrored the sun’s journey across the sky and was associated with Khepri, the morning manifestation of the sun and creator god Ra, who pushed the solar disc every morning, renewing creation.
- Larvae emerging from buried dung balls represented life arising from decay, echoing the resurrection of the deceased.
- The pupa’s resemblance to a mummy symbolised death preceding rebirth.
- Classical writers believed all scarabs were self-generating males, reinforcing their association with divine creative power.

Linked with Khepri and the hieroglyph hpr (‘to come into being’), the scarab embodied transformation and renewal. Its enduring symbolism made it the most popular amulet motif, often crafted from blue-green faience, a colour associated with life, growth and regeneration. The addition of wings reinforced the notion of transcendence, while the placement over the chest area of the mummy endowed the scarab with divine protective power, safeguarding the wearer during the journey to the afterlife.



Fig 2: Khepri

Bibliography

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Images: Amulet photos are property of Lucy Negus/Lexin Jessop, edited by Lucy Negus. Comparative objects: www.metmuseum.org

Fig 1: Suppl. 5291, <https://collezioni.museoegizio.it/>

Fig 2: QV66 Khepri Tomb of Nefertari entrance. Manna Nader Gabana Studios Cairo, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/manna4u/33942954261/>