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## SCARAB الجعران

*Kathlyn M. Cooney*

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## SCARAB

### الجعران


Kathlyn M. Cooney

Skarabäus  
Scarabée

*The ancient Egyptian scarab is an artistic depiction of the indigenous Egyptian dung beetle. Mythologically, the scarab represented the ability of the sun god to bring about his own rebirth. There are a number of different kinds of scarabs, including heart scarabs, commemorative scarabs, and scarab amulets, indicating their different functions within varying social contexts—from apotropaic to amuletic, socioeconomic, and propagandistic. The blank oval underside of the scarab amulet was an excellent location for the inscription of personal names, kings' names, apotropaic sayings, or geometric or figural designs. Scarabs are extremely difficult to date; very few are found in archaeological context and most are unprovenanced in private and museum collections.*

الجعران المصري القديم هو رسم للخنفساء المصرية المحلية. تمثل الخنفساء أسطورياً مقدرة إله الشمس على إعادة ولادة نفسه. توجد أنواع مختلفة من الجعارين مثل التمام وجعارين القلب والجعارين التذكارية والتي تمثل إستخدامات مختلفة على حسب النطاقات الإجتماعية فهم يقوموا بالحماية في بعض الأحيان أو لهم أغراض إجتماعية أو إقتصادية أو حتى دعائية. الفراغ البيضاوي الموجود أسفل الجعران وفر مكان مثالي لكتابة النقوش مثل أسماء الأفراد أو الملوك أو كتابة التعاويذ للحماية أو بعض الأشكال الهندسية. تأريخ الجعارين ليس سهلاً فنادر ما يُعثَر عليهم بالطبقات الأثرية وغالبيتهم غير معروف المصدر وموجودين من ضمن مقتنيات المتاحف أو مجموعات خاصة.

**T**he ancient Egyptian scarab, from Latin *scarabaeus* (“beetle”), from Greek *karabos* (“beetle”; “crayfish”), is an artistic representation of the indigenous Egyptian dung beetle (species *Scarabaeus sacer*), an insect that rolls balls of dung in which to lay its eggs (Hanski and Cambefort 1991). The ancient Egyptians linked this unique reproductive behavior to mythological cycles of solar death and rebirth. The scarab was used by the ancient Egyptians as a symbol of the rising sun being pushed across the sky (just as the beetle pushes balls of dung across the sand), exemplifying the notion that the sun god can create his own means of rebirth (fig. 1;

Giveon 1984). Such representations can be seen in the scarab’s multiple depictions in the *Amduat*, a New Kingdom composition describing the sun’s nighttime journey through the netherworld (fig. 2; Hornung 1987 - 1994). This notion of masculine self-resurrection is clarified in the scarab’s function as a hieroglyphic sign, an example of which is featured in the verb  *hpr*, “to come into being,” and its derivatives. The noun “scarab,” *hpr* (literally “that which comes into being”), could refer to either the scarab beetle or to the amulet (Erman and Grapow 1926 - 1931: WB III: 267; Gardiner 1957: Sign-list, L1). The name of the “newborn” morning sun—a deity depicted with a scarab beetle for

a head—was *hpry*, usually rendered as “Khepri” in Egyptological literature.



Figure 1. Detail of the 19<sup>th</sup>-Dynasty inner coffin of Khons, showing the scarab beetle pushing the sun disk into rebirth (left) and Nut's embrace of the solar beetle (right).

### *The Heart Scarab*

There are a number of different scarab types from ancient Egypt. The best known is the heart scarab, the earliest examples dating to the 17<sup>th</sup> Dynasty. The heart scarab is a large amulet (fig. 3), ideally made of green stone (*nmlhf*), inscribed with Chapter 30B from the *Book of the Dead* (Malaise 1978). It was placed on the mummy, often within a pectoral, or in the vicinity of the mummy, in order to control the consciousness and memory of the deceased in the halls of justice, lest the heart speak against its owner. The so-called winged scarab (fig. 4), similar to the heart scarab in form and size but lacking an inscription on the underside, was common in the Late Period; this faience scarab allowed identification of the deceased with the reborn sun god. It was placed on the heart of the mummy with detached outspread wings on either side, all usually part of a faience beaded network that covered the chest and legs of the mummy (Andrews 1994: 58; Friedman 1998: 247).

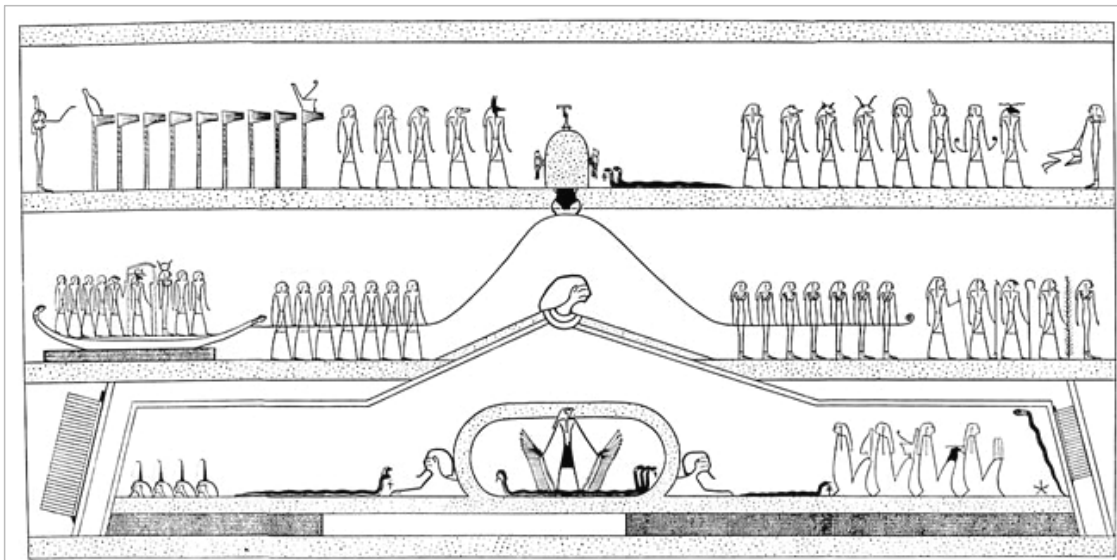


Figure 2. An image from the 5<sup>th</sup> hour of the *Amduat*, depicting the scarab literally pulling the boat of the elderly sun god through the hours of the night; in this way the sun god creates his own rebirth.



Figure 3. Heart scarab. New Kingdom or later. Light green stone with modern gilding. Inscribed with five lines of text reading “Osiris Tewersemen(?): He says, ‘My heart of my heart (*sic*) of (my) mother, twice, my heart of (my) transformations, do not stand against me as a witness.’”



Figure 4. Winged scarab dating to the 26<sup>th</sup> Dynasty. Faience with traces of gilding.

### *The Commemorative Scarab*

Another well-known scarab type is the so-called commemorative scarab, the underside of which is inscribed with an announcement from the royal family (Blankenberg-van Delden 1969). These large scarabs were first produced in the 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty in the reign of Thutmose IV, reached a height of production under Amenhotep III, and continued to be

produced, but to a lesser extent, under Akhenaten. The underside of the commemorative scarab includes about ten lines of text, the most famous of which relate the building of a lake for Queen Tiye (fig. 5), the hunting prowess of Amenhotep III, and this same ruler’s marriage to Mitannian princess Gilukhepa (Kozloff and Bryan 1992). The commemorative scarab played a number of social roles, in particular that of spreading knowledge of royal achievements, status, and wealth throughout elite society in Egypt and beyond, creating a kind of mobile and personalized propaganda network.



Figure 5. Commemorative scarab documenting the construction of a lake for Queen Tiye by Amenhotep III.

### *The Scarab Amulet*

The most common scarab type is the scarab amulet, so ubiquitous that it is usually referenced in the Egyptological and archaeological literature simply as “scarab” (Andrews 1994). The beetle form was ideal for use as an amulet. Most scarab amulets are quite small, measuring between 10 mm and 50 mm in length. They are ovoid in shape, the back of the amulet depicting the head and folded wings of the insect and the sides depicting the legs. The scarab amulet is usually pierced longitudinally, so that the owner could wear the object as a ring, necklace, or bracelet. The blank oval underside of the scarab amulet was an excellent location for the inscription of personal names, kings’ names, apotropaic sayings, geometric designs, or figural representations. The scarab amulet could be

carved from a variety of stones, including costly amethyst, jasper, carnelian, and lapis lazuli, or from less expensive stones, such as steatite, which was usually glazed. A great many scarab amulets were molded from faience, especially in the New Kingdom (Keel 1995). The earliest scarab amulets are dated stylistically to the 6<sup>th</sup> Dynasty; most early examples are uninscribed. The first scarab seals, bearing the name and title of the owner, developed in the Middle Kingdom. The scarab's use continued in ancient Egypt until the Ptolemaic Period, although production after the reign of Ramses III was limited (Giveon 1984). The so-called "scaraboid" (fig. 6) also belongs to this class of object and describes any amulet carved in the standard ovoid shape but depicting an animal, such as a goose, cat, or frog (Hornung and Staehelin 1976: 35), rather than a beetle.



Figure 6. Scaraboid in the shape of a hippopotamus. Blue glazed steatite. New Kingdom or later.

### *Scarab Amulet Dating*

Scarab base-decoration is commonly used as a dating tool; nonetheless, it is notoriously difficult to use a scarab found in context to date an archaeological site. Many scarabs are inscribed with the names of rulers already dead at the time of production; others are heirlooms, found entirely out of their production context. Many scarab and seal specialists rightly call for contextual study that incorporates historical and archaeological data (Keel 1995; Richards 2001), but this is impossible with art-market pieces, which make up the bulk of scarab collections around

the world (Schlick-Nolte and von Droste zu Hülshoff 1990). Modern forgeries complicate the issue of dating even more. In the end, many scarab specialists base their dating on stylistic comparison to other scarabs, only some of which are found in archaeological contexts.

Even scarab inscriptions with royal names cannot necessarily be dated to the reigns of those rulers, because such names are often inscribed long after a ruler's death—particularly those of the 4<sup>th</sup>-Dynasty king Sneferu, the 18<sup>th</sup>-Dynasty Thutmose III (Jaeger 1982), and the 19<sup>th</sup>-Dynasty Ramesses II. Scarab amulets inscribed with royal names (Petrie 1889) contribute less to scarab typological development than one would hope, providing only the *terminus post quem* date. Nonetheless, many scarab publications (Brunner-Traut and Brunner 1981; Hall 1913; Knight 1915; Newberry 1908; Petrie 1889, 1917; Price 1897) have used the royal names inscribed on scarabs as dating criteria, dating other, non-royal, scarabs based on stylistic comparison with these named scarabs. Other scarab experts have reacted against this circular use of unreliably dated comperanda by not providing dates at all (Hornung and Staehelin 1976). Egyptologists and archaeologists have also attempted dating typologies based on the style of scarab backs, heads, and legs, so as to avoid or to check the suggested date of the decoration (Rowe 1936; Tufnell 1984; Ward and Dever 1994). Typological dating of scarab forms is most useful when dealing with larger scarab groups statistically, but it is not very helpful for dating individual scarabs without common archaeological provenance (Keel 1995). Recent scarab studies use all available criteria—inscription, form, material, size, and archaeological context, for example—to provide wide date-ranges rather than exact reigns (Bietak and Czerny 2004; Keel 1995, 1997; Schlick-Nolte and von Droste zu Hülshoff 1990; Schulz 2007; Teeter 2003). Very broad date-ranges are now the norm in scarab publications.

*Scarab Amulet Decoration and Meaning*

It is quite common to organize scarabs by the type of decoration found on the scarab base. The first type of scarab base decoration includes examples ranging in date from the Middle Kingdom through the Late Period, depicting apotropaic and divine iconography, including images of gods and so-called good-luck sayings. This group also includes scarabs from the New Kingdom and Third Intermediate Period that are particularly associated with the god Amen and the many cryptographic writings of this god's name (fig. 7; Drioton 1957, 1960).

The second type of scarab base includes rulers' names, epithets, and images, and these examples also date from the Middle Kingdom through the Late Period.

The scarab represented the rebirth of the sun god and was therefore intimately associated with cycles of masculine royal renewal and, by extension, Egyptian political power systems. Because of the association of the king and the sun god, scarabs were often inscribed with the names and/or depictions of the king (either currently reigning or deceased). In many ways the scarab was meant to be a gendered object. The word *hpr*, when used as a noun, is masculine, and most iconography on the underside of scarabs revolves around the masculine political world—of kings and courtiers. This is not to say that a scarab amulet could not depict or be owned by a woman, just that it was more representative of masculine spheres of power and kingship.

A third category of scarab base decoration features non-royal personal names and titles, suggesting the scarab's use as the owner's personal seal, a type that reached its height in the Middle Kingdom (Martin 1971). Most of these non-royal names and titles belong to holders of elite offices or priesthoods (fig. 8).

A fourth decorative group depicts motifs of northwest Asian origin, in addition to foreign adaptations of Egyptian iconography (Bietak and Czerny 2004; Givon 1985; Nunn and Schulz 2004; Richards 1992; Teissier 1996;

Westenholz 1995). Many of these scarabs date from the late Middle Kingdom and Second Intermediate Period (the period of Hyksos domination). Others date to the New Kingdom, when Egypt's empire reached its apex.

A fifth scarab amulet group features geometric and stylized patterns, many of them dating to the Middle Kingdom and Second Intermediate Period. Most common within this group are abstract geometric, scroll, spiral, woven, floral, and even humanoid patterns. It should also be mentioned that many scarab amulet undersides are uninscribed, and many such examples are made of semi-precious stones.



Figure 7. Scarab inscribed with throne name of Thutmose III, reading *ntr nfr Mn-hpr-r*, “the good god Menkheperra,” and below this an *nh* sign, meaning “may he live.” Menkheperra can also be read cryptographically as the name Amen-ra (sun disk = *j*; *mn* sign = *mn*; kheper beetle = *r*). Faience. 18 - 20th dynasties.



Figure 8. Scarab inscribed with the name and title of a bureaucrat, “Royal seal bearer and overseer of the seal, Khar (?).” Middle Kingdom to Second Intermediate Period. Steatite with modern brown color.



Figure 9. Second Intermediate Period scarab, inscribed with name of Hyksos king Sheshi. Glazed steatite.

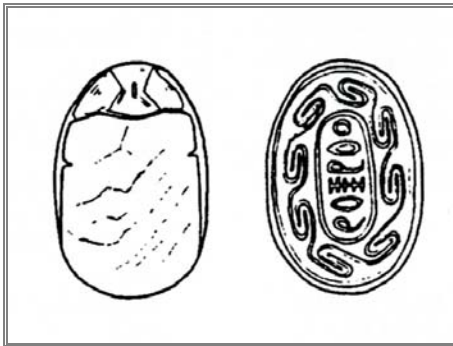


Figure 10. Second Intermediate Period scarab with the Hyksos *anra* inscription. Steatite.

### *Scarab Amulet Function*

The small size and compact shape of the scarab amulet facilitated mobility and distribution, making the object amenable to various public and private political agendas (Cooney and Tyrrell 2005). In the Middle Kingdom, scarabs were often utilized as seals by non-royal bureaucrats, and many personal names and titles are found on scarabs (Martin 1971). Scarabs were manipulated as political tools by the Hyksos kings and their officials during the Second Intermediate Period, when inscribed examples (fig. 9) were ostensibly distributed to elites and vassals (Bietak and Czerny 2004; Bourke and Eriksson 2006; Mlinar 2006; Niccacci 1980; Tufnell 1984). During the New Kingdom, scarab amulets and seals were spread throughout the increasingly connected Mediterranean and

Near Eastern worlds, and particularly the Levant; as such, the occurrence of kings' names and figures became especially common (Giveon 1985; Keel 1995; Keel and Schroer 1989; Rowe 1936). The New Kingdom also saw a blossoming of personal piety in scarab amulet design, when seal iconography increasingly turned towards divine figures, aphorisms, and cryptography.

The wide range of scarab decorative genres complicates the issue of scarab meaning and, by extension, function. Scarab amulets fulfilled multiple uses: as administrative tools, as markers of social status, as distributed propaganda messages, or as apotropaic talismans. It is therefore very difficult to place these objects into specific religious, political, or socio-economic categories. Discussion of a given scarab's decorative genre and function is partly dependent on its production, distribution, and reception—all processes that are difficult to discern in the preserved ancient record, and especially that of unprovenanced scarabs from private collections.

The small size of the scarab base required the creation and utilization of abbreviated, abstracted, and "loaded" iconography that could be multi-functional and multi-interpretational for the scarab owner. Such iconography provided layers of complexity, because conceptual signs and symbols have multiple grammatical and semiotic meanings, resulting in the overlap of genres and thus scholarly confusion about scarab function. Ultimately, the best explanation of scarab function is that the scarab amulet held a number of meanings and functions simultaneously, depending on the manufacturer's intent, the owner's understanding of the piece, and the occasions of its use. Some of these meanings are amenable to protection and personal piety, while others point to a socio-political use. The scarab amulet's symbolism was intended to be inclusive and broad, rather than confined to one particular meaning in a given circumstance.



## *Bibliographic Notes*

William Flinders Petrie's volumes on scarabs were the first to create a broad typological and seriated understanding of these objects (Petrie 1889, 1914, 1917, 1925). Following Petrie's scholarship, other catalogs of scarab collections have focused on the dating and typologies of various collections (Brunner-Traut and Brunner 1981; Hall 1913; Hornung and Staehelin 1976; Jaeger 1982; Malaise 1978; Newberry 1908; Price 1897; Schlick-Nolte and von Droste zu Hülshoff 1990). Typological approaches have also been used for the many scarabs from the ancient Near East, particularly from the Levant, many of them dating to the Second Intermediate Period (Bietak and Czerny 2004; Bourke and Eriksson 2006; Giveon 1985, 1988; Keel and Schroer 1989; Martin 1971; Niccacci 1980; Rowe 1936; Tufnell 1984; Ward 1978; Ward and Dever 1994; Westenholz 1995). Emily Teeter has been among the first to publish a large group of scarabs from stratified Egyptian archaeological contexts, in this case from the temple site of Medinet Habu, a valuable tool, given that most scarab amulet collections from Egypt are unprovenanced (Teeter 2003).

With variable but not unreasonable dating standards now established, some of the most recent scarab publications are increasingly turning their attention away from typologies and dating to the complexities of the scarab's function and meaning within its contemporary socio-political and religious world, taking into account the many different uses these amulets might have had: as administrative tools, as markers of social status, as propagandistic messages, or as apotropaic talismans. Fiona Richards, for example, examines the so-called *anra* scarabs of the Second Intermediate Period (fig. 10) as socio-political tools in a world of increased ethnic and linguistic overlap (Richards 2001). Othmar Keel also moves beyond typological discussions and into glyptics, examining the function of these objects as protective talismans and as a means of distributing political and social messages (Keel 1995, 1997). Other new work has addressed issues of glyptic meaning, miniaturization, and the multi-layered socio-religious significance of scarab amulets (Cooney and Tyrrell 2005; Schulz 2007). New research also focuses on trade routes and elite exchange, putting the Egyptian scarab into larger Near Eastern and Mediterranean contexts (Ben-Tor 2006; Bietak and Czerny 2004; Bourke and Eriksson 2006; Martin 2006; Mlinar 2006; Nunn and Schulz 2004).

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## Image Credits

- Figure 1 Detail of the 19<sup>th</sup>-Dynasty inner coffin of Khons, showing the scarab beetle pushing the sun disk into rebirth (left) and Nut's embrace of the solar beetle (right). Metropolitan Museum of Art 86.1.2 a-b. Photo by the author.
- Figure 2 An image from the 5<sup>th</sup> hour of the *Amduat*, depicting the scarab literally pulling the boat of the elderly sun god through the hours of the night; in this way the sun god creates his own rebirth. Photo after Hornung (1991: 44).
- Figure 3 Heart scarab. New Kingdom or later. Light green stone with modern gilding. Inscribed with five lines of text reading "Osiris Tewel-semen(?): He says, 'My heart of my heart (*sic*) of (my) mother, twice, my heart of (my) transformations, do not stand against me as a witness.'" Los Angeles County Museum of Art 50.22.24, gift of the William Randolph Hearst Foundation. Photo courtesy of Los Angeles County Museum of Art.
- Figure 4 Winged scarab dating to the 26<sup>th</sup> Dynasty. Faience with traces of gilding. Detroit Institute of Arts 51.226, Founders Society Purchase, Elizabeth and Allan Sheldon Fund. Photo after Friedman (1998: 150).
- Figure 5 Commemorative scarab documenting the construction of a lake for Queen Tiye by Amenhotep III. Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1935, no. 35.2.1. Photo after Kozloff and Bryan (1992: 71).

- Figure 6 Scaraboid in the shape of a hippopotamus. Blue glazed steatite. New Kingdom or later. Los Angeles County Museum of Art 86.313.27. Gift of Ruth Greenberg. Photo courtesy of Los Angeles County Museum of Art.
- Figure 7 Scarab inscribed with throne name of Thutmose III, reading *ntr nfr Mn-hpr-r*, “the good god Menkheperra,” and below this an *nh* sign, meaning “may he live.” Menkheperra can also be read cryptographically as the name Amen-ra (sun disk = *j*; *mn* sign = *mn*; kheper beetle = *r*). Faience. 18 - 20th Dynasties. Los Angeles County Museum of Art 50.4.5.4. Gift of the William Randolph Hearst Foundation. Photo courtesy of Los Angeles County Museum of Art.
- Figure 8 Scarab inscribed with the name and title of a bureaucrat, “Royal seal bearer and overseer of the seal, Khar (?).” Steatite with modern brown color. Middle Kingdom to Second Intermediate Period. Los Angeles County Museum of Art M.86.313.11. Gift of Ruth Greenberg. Photo courtesy of Los Angeles County Museum of Art.
- Figure 9 Second Intermediate Period scarab, inscribed with name of Hyksos king Sheshi. Glazed steatite. Los Angeles County Museum of Art M.86.313.13, gift of Ruth Greenberg. Photo courtesy of Los Angeles County Museum of Art.
- Figure 10 Second Intermediate Period scarab with the Hyksos *amra* inscription. Steatite. Israel Museum IM 13. Image after Richards (2001: 323).