THE FITZWILLIAM MUSEUM

EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

Fact Sheet

Heka shown on the coffin of Newspawershefyt
(Gallery 19, Case 17)
E.1.1822

The Ancient Egyptians
Magic

In ancient Egypt, magic permeated every layer of life; people sought protection or cure from illness with spells, charms and prayers, mothers wore amulets to safeguard their unborn children, and the very kingship of the pharaoh was formalised through magic ritual.

Heka, the Egyptian word for magic, and the name of the god of magic, was one of the primeval forces used by the first gods to create the universe. From its initial use at the beginning of time, magic was continuously used for investing each pharaoh with the power of the god Horus in order to maintain "maat", the order and balance of the universe.

The force of magic was used by individuals and priests in many ways. In later times, priests who led the temple rituals for society as a whole, were often also the magicians who worked personal magic on behalf of individuals. There is plentiful evidence of ancient Egyptian magic, in objects and text, which span about four and a half thousand years of Egyptian history.

Word and Image

Ancient Egyptian writing consisted of images, and images were invested with magical properties. The ancient Egyptians believed that images and hieroglyphs could actually manifest, they could become the subject depicted, or the meaning held by the writing. Therefore hieroglyphic writing, portraits and all types of images were extremely powerful. For example, it was believed that defacing a name or a portrait prevented that individual from continuing to exist in the afterlife.

The majority of ancient Egyptians were illiterate, and, as a result, priests and scribes were highly respected as they could read religious texts. Written spells were regarded as particularly powerful and were passed down through families, sometimes they were folded up and worn on the body, the text becoming a protective amulet.

Shabti Figures

The evidence of the ancient Egyptian image of the afterlife reveals a complex picture, very different to earthly existence, and sometimes full of danger. An individual's existence in the afterlife included work such as farming and irrigation. By including shabtis (also called shawabtis or ushabtis) in burial goods, the Egyptians hoped to be spared their share of work, for a shabti acted as a substitute for a deceased person and would work on that person's behalf in the afterlife. The

shabti figure answered when the deceased was called by the gods to work. The appearance of a shabti is stylised, it is not a portrait of an individual, the identity of the deceased is held in their name, which is written on the front of the figure.

Examples of Shabti Figures

Faience Shabti Figure
Gallery 19, case 19, label 15, museum no. E.272.1939

Shabti Figures
Gallery 19, case 20, labels 6, 7, 8, 9, museum numbers E.8.1887, E.210.1932, E.34.1937, E.337.1954

Amulets

Jewellery in ancient Egypt was usually symbolic and was often worn to bestow magical protection or good fortune on the wearer. Protective amulets were often made in shapes derived from mythology and hieroglyphs. In order for these amulets to give full protection, they were worn close to the body, usually worn around the neck or wrist, often incorporated into a necklace or bracelet. Amulets gave protection at all stages of existence, they were placed round the necks of children and inside the mummy wrappings of the deceased.

Some of the most commonly worn were:

- The Eye of Horus, which bestowed general well-being on the wearer.
- The Ankh, which is the hieroglyph meaning "life". It can be seen on many objects in the galleries, as well as in the jewellery cases. Gods were often portrayed carrying this potent sign.
- The Scarab Beetle was a hieroglyph (read as Kheper – meaning to be born) and so a sign of rebirth and symbolised regeneration from this life to the next.
- The Nefer-sign was the hieroglyph meaning perfect, which we often translate as "good" or "beautiful".
- Fish amulets were thought to protect the wearer from drowning, a real danger in the Nile. They were often tied to the end of children's hair bunches.

Scarabs and Heart Scarabs

Scarabs were potent amulets made in the image of the god Khepri. The legend of this god was based on observations of the beetle *Scarabaeus Sacer*, whose young apparently magically emerge from a dung ball pushed along the ground by the female. An analogy evolved between the rolling dung ball and the sun travelling across the heavens, and so the beetle god and the scarab became associated with the dead passing from the darkness of death into the light of the next world.

In the New Kingdom, a particular type of scarab amulet, known as a “heart scarab”, was sometimes placed in the chest cavity of the mummy in place of the heart. When the deceased was judged, at the ceremony of the weighing-of-the-heart, their fate would be protected by the amuletic properties of the scarab and in particular by the spell inscribed on its back.

Examples of Scarabs

Faience winged scarab
Gallery 19, case 19, label 22, Museum no. E.133.1932

Burial of Nakhtefmut
Gallery 19, case 25, Museum no. E.62.1896

Coffin of Pakepu (end section)
Gallery 19, case 25, Museum no. E.2.1869

Magician's wand

The 13th dynasty bronze magician's wand in the Fitzwilliam's collection was found entangled in a mass of hair in a tomb in Thebes. As it is in the form of a snake, it is thought to represent the goddess Weret Hekau, 'the great of magic'- who was represented in cobra form. In ancient Egyptian belief, this powerful goddess was a foster mother who watched over the living pharaohs and was the goddess of the pharoah's royal crown.

In the same tomb, along with some magical, medicinal papyri, a statuette assumed to be a female magician (sau) was found holding similar wands – she is lioness headed, or wears the mask of a lion and holds a wand in each hand. A sau magician could supply magical protection (the word sa means to protect) by making charms and amulets, and by spoken and written spells.

Examples of Magician's Wands

Wood ibis 'wand'
Gallery 19, case 13, label 33, museum no. E.GA.2855.1943

Copper Alloy 'wand'
Gallery 19, case 13, label 34, museum no. E.63.1896

Stelae

The stela was an essential feature of ancient Egyptian burials, only the coffin and its contents were more important. A stela was an ancient form of gravestone, but its function was more complex than its modern counterpart.

The inscriptions on a stela identified the deceased by name and titles and the magical properties attributed to writing meant these inscriptions literally "made his name live". To deface a name was a violent act that could destroy the identity of the dead in the afterlife.

The inscriptions and images carved or painted on a stele also made important provision for the needs of the dead. The stela could be positioned on the outside or inside of a tomb and offerings were placed on offering tables situated before it.

A special type of stela inscribed with writing and images depicting the story of the healing of the god Horus, was sometimes used to help the sick or wounded. Water that had been poured over the stelae was drunk by the patient, or applied to the wound.

Examples of Stelae

Limestone stela
Gallery 19, case 19, label 19, Museum no. E.65.1901

Painted Limestone stela
Gallery 19, case 20, label 4, Museum no. E.259.1900

Wood funerary stela
Gallery 19, case 15, label 23, Museum no. E.GA.4540.1943