

**Scarabs in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art
Part I. Distributed propaganda or intimate protection?**

K.M. Cooney* & J. Tyrrell§

*Introduction to the Humanities Department
Stanford University
Building 250–251J
Stanford, California 94305–2020
United States of America
kcooney@stanford.edu

§West Semitic Research and InscriptiFact Project
12 Empty Saddle Road
Rolling Hills Estates, CA 90274
United States of America
jtyrrell@usc.edu

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Abstract

This case study of 79 unprovenanced scarabs and scaraboid amulets in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art addresses glyptics, miniaturisation, distribution, and reception. Meaning and function can only be examined by broadening our investigatory criteria outside of the norm (typological and categorical) to include semiotic, anthropological and psychological factors, allowing an understanding of a scarab as a powerful social tool, not only tied to personal religious beliefs, but also to state propaganda, as well as state cultic powers, *i.e.*, the king and his cosmic, ritualistic role in ancient Egyptian cosmology and society. The multiple grammatical and symbolic meanings of the abstractions found on scarab bases seem purposely intended to fulfil multiple functions at one and the same time.

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1. Introduction

This article is a case study of 79 unprovenanced scarabs and scaraboid amulets in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (hereafter referred to as LACMA), given to the museum by four different private donors: the William Randolph Hearst Foundation in 1950, Hyatt Robert von Dehn in 1969, Robert Miller and Marilyn Miller Deluca in 1980, and Ruth Greenberg in 1986.

One of the most compelling features of scarab production in ancient Egypt is its endurance as an art form from the Late Old Kingdom to the Late Period (ca. 2181–332 BCE). The continued existence of the scarab in ancient Egyptian culture is the source of ongoing typological and chronological problems for scholars (for more information on our dating methodology, see the associated catalogue). As a result, the vast majority of scarab publications have focused on typology and dating at the expense of deeper examinations of the scarab's function as mobile and personal amulets. In the past 25 years, numerous publications on ancient Egyptian scarabs, seals, and glyptics have appeared (Brunner–Traut & Brunner, 1981; Giveon, 1985; Hornung & Staehelin, 1976; Jaeger, 1982; Martin, 1971; Schlick–Nolte & Von Droste zu Hülshoff, 1990; Teeter & Wilfong, 2003; Tufnell, 1984; Ward, 1978) each building on earlier scarab catalogues (Hall, 1913; Knight, 1915; Newberry, 1979; Petrie, 1889, 1914, 1925; Price, 1897) producing a loose, if somewhat inconsistent, typological standard now used to date and study scarabs, both provenanced and unprovenanced.

With variable but not unreasonable typological standards thus established, some of the most recent scarab publications are increasingly turning their attention to the complexities of the scarab's function and meaning within its contemporary socio–political and religious world. Richards (2001), for example, examines the so-called *anra* scarabs of the Second Intermediate Period as socio–political tools in a world of increased ethnic and linguistic overlap. Keel (1990) also moves beyond typological discussions and into glyptics, examining the function of these objects as protective talismans¹ and as a means of distributing political and social messages. The aim of this article is to consider this aspect of the study of scarabs more thoroughly and systematically, employing the LACMA scarab collection as a case study. Our intent is to address glyptics, miniaturisation, and the multi-layered significance of these objects, that is, the meanings of scarabs rather than a single minded focus on typology.²

Electronic publication of small finds is incredibly beneficial. First, we can avoid the high costs of paper publication, which in the case of small finds includes a lengthy catalogue as well as numerous photographs and plates. Second, we can publish numerous photographs in colour that document every side of each object. Because we are limited by the quality of online photo publication (viewable in this PalArch edition), we have also produced an additional CD–rom with much higher quality digital images. With the publication of this CD–rom, we can thereby bypass the subjective and time consuming method of publishing line drawings, in favour of high quality photographs that can be enlarged and manipulated by the viewer. Each photograph is published with a scale bar, to provide the viewer an understanding of each object's size, no matter how large the object appears on screen.

2. Genre, reception and the Egyptian scarab

The LACMA scarab collection represents a number of decorative genres. The majority represent royal iconography on the base. For example, cat. no. 2³ (figure 1) shows the king as a sphinx trampling an enemy. The king is identified as Men–kheper–Re, or Thutmose III, and the “good god.” Another example, cat. no. 15 (figure 2) bears a simple inscription “Son of Re, Sheshi, given life” in reference to the well-known Hyksos 15th dynasty king.

The second most popular scarab genre in the LACMA collection is apotropaic and divine iconography, including depictions of deities further reinforced by hieroglyphic statements. For instance, cat. no. 34 (figure 3), bears an apotropaic good luck inscription that reads “The day is good and just.” Cat. no. 44 (figure 4) has a figured inscription reading “Re is the ruler of justice” and it includes a depiction of the goddess Ma'at as the appropriate symbol. This group also includes scarabs from the New Kingdom and later that are particularly associated with the god Amen and the many associated cryptographic writings of this god's name (Droiten, 1957, 1960). Another example, cat. no. 54 (figure 5) can be read as Amen–Re if the sun disk represents *i*, the *m3^ct* feather *m*, the Monthu falcon *mn*, and the sun disk reads as *r^c*.

¹ Note that the words ‘amulet’ and ‘talisman’ are used interchangeably in this article. For justification, see Knuf & Knuf (1984).

² See the associated catalogue in this volume for details about each scarab as well as the CD with high resolution images (see www.PalArch.nl, section archaeology of Egypt/Egyptology). High resolution images of the scarabs are also available via the InscriptiFact image database (see www.inscriptifact.com).

³ The catalogue number refers to the object in the catalogue and its figure number in the catalogue and CD.



Figures 1–5 (from left to right). Figure 1: cat. no. 2; figure 2: cat. no. 15; figure 3: cat. no. 34; figure 4: cat. no. 44; figure 5: cat. no. 54. All photographs © West Semitic Research.

Some scarabs in the LACMA corpus depict personal titles and names on the base.⁴ Cat. no. 57 (figure 6) is such a scarab, bearing the inscription “overseer of the seal Peri-m-[wa]kh(?)” as is cat. no. 59 (figure 7) identifying the “royal seal bearer and overseer of the seal, Har.”

Several LACMA scarabs bear motifs that are ‘Near Eastern’ or northwest Asian in origin, in addition to foreign adaptations of Egyptian iconography. Cat. no. 61 (figure 8) depicts a kilted deity, probably the so-called “Syrian Branch Goddess,” holding a palm leaf (Richards, 1992: 15–19). Cat. no. 62 (figure 9) depicts two human figures on either side of a gazelle. The human figures, in attitude, clothing and design represent typical depictions of Syro–Palestinian iconography on scarabs and seals (Giveon, 1985; Richards, 1992; Teissier, 1996; Westenholz, 1995).



Figures 6–9 (from left to right). Figure 6: cat. no. 57; figure 7: cat. no. 59; figure 8: cat. no. 61; figure 9: cat. no. 62. All photographs © West Semitic Research.

The final decorative genre in the LACMA scarab collection includes abstract geometric, scroll, spiral, woven, floral, and even humanoid patterns. Spiral patterns are common and seen in cat. no. 65 (figure 10) and 67 (figure 11). See cat. no. 66 (figure 12), a scarab with intertwining lines, flanked by two curved lines. For a humanoid geometric pattern, see cat. no. 68 (figure 13), a frog scaraboid depicting two stick figure men oriented head to foot on the base, each holding a staff or stick in their hands.

The wide range in scarab genres complicates the issue of scarab meaning, and by extension, scarab function. Both Keel (1990) and Richards (2001) call for contextual and functional study of scarabs, taking into account the many different uses these amulets might have had: as administrative tools, as markers of social status, as distributed propaganda messages, or as apotropaic talismans. The line, however, blurs when attempting to place these objects into specific religious, political or socio-economic categories. Kippenberg (1990) explains that, because most scarabs seem to fall under multiple genres, each is subjected to a different set of interpretative questions depending on which genre becomes the focus of attention for a particular piece. Discussion of a given scarab’s genre is partly dependent on its production, distribution, and reception,⁵ which are all processes that are difficult to discern in the preserved ancient record and most especially in unprovenanced scarabs from private collections, as is the circumstance of the LACMA corpus. Kippenberg (1990: ix) notes, as a result, that finding the meaning of a particular scarab’s base decoration often falls into that very gap between production and reception.

⁴ For this type of base decoration, which is beyond the scope of this article, see Martin (1971).

⁵ Which Gombrich (1983: 225) calls “guided projection.” For reception aesthetics, see Kemp (1986).



Figures 10–14 (from left to right, top to bottom). Figure 10: cat. no. 65; figure 11: cat. no. 67; figure 12: cat. no. 66; figure 13: cat. no. 68; figure 14: cat. no. 29. All photographs © West Semitic Research.

Linking scarab genre and function raises a number of issues. How does the genre of a scarab's base decoration translate into the function of that amulet? Why was the figure of the king such a popular depiction on Egyptian scarab bases? How were such royal compositions received by their owners, in comparison to scenes depicting higher supernatural powers, like the god Amen-Re? Who demanded the composition genre: the private sector or the state? And finally, how are we to read such glyptic decoration?

One example from the LACMA collection typifies the challenging issues of genre, reception, and function. Cat. no. 29 (figure 14) represents a collection of hieroglyphic signs that can be read as the birth name Ramses, or, cryptographically, as the name of the god Amen-Re. Such a scarab therefore falls into two genres, suggesting a multi-layered function for the piece. On the one hand, it is a piece with political meaning in its Ramesside Period context. On the other hand, the cryptographic writing is representative of burgeoning personal piety towards the god Amen-Re during the same time period. This particular scarab may have functioned as both a socio-political marker in addition to being an amulet that intimately tied its owner to the god Amen-Re. Because of the abstract glyptic depiction, the lines between kingship and divinity are blurred, which, of course, falls in line with broader concepts in Egyptian religion.

3. Miniaturisation and abstraction

A scarab base was often decorated to fit as much iconography as possible onto a small space, and scarabs are often characterised by a *horror vacui* in which apotropaic and political symbols are crowded into the same small oval surface (Keel, 1990: 209–210). Cat. no. 3 (figure 15) exemplifies this type of dense composition. The king sits on a solar barque, and every bit of available space is used to squeeze in the king's name, epithets, and other symbols. Because of the space limitations of small amulets, abstraction is a necessary and powerful tool in glyptic art, providing the owner of an inscribed amulet with multiple uses and perceptions. For example, cat. no. 5 (figure 16) shows the king kneeling in a worshipful pose underneath the sun barque. In front of him is a *nfr* sign and behind him is the *mꜣt* feather. This small composition can perhaps be read as “The good god [*i.e.* the living king] worships Re in truth.” The abstraction of this piece is difficult to decode. Even if this scarab decoration was not meant to be ‘read’ as a grammatical phrase, the collection of symbols (the sun barque, the king in worshipful pose, the feather of truth, the *nfr* “goodness” sign) are nonetheless powerful devices of social and supernatural protection that the scarab owner could interpret in any number of ways.

The small size of the scarab base requires the creation and utilisation of abbreviated, abstracted and loaded iconography that can be multi-functional and multi-interpretational for the owners of the scarab. However, this very abstraction provides layers of complexity because, according to Keel (1990: 205, 208) conceptual signs and symbols can have multiple grammatical and semiotic meanings resulting in the overlap of genres. This overlap often causes scholarly confusion about scarab function. Some depictions seem deceptively

simple at first. Cat. no. 32 (figure 17) depicts a single goose on the base of a stamp seal, but this goose could have had many interpretations and meanings for its owner: as the god Amen, or as the earth god Geb, or as a form of the sun god, or as the ‘son’ of Re, *i.e.*, the king. This small seal may have had all of these meanings simultaneously, depending on the manufacturer’s intent as well as the owner’s understanding of the piece, as dependent on the occasion of its use as an amulet. Some of these meanings are amenable to protection and personal piety in an amulet, while others point to a socio–political use. The likelihood is that the amulet’s symbolism is intended to be inclusive and broad, rather than confined to one particular meaning in a given circumstance.

Other examples of scarab decoration are complex in layout, but rather clear in genre, such as cat. no. 45 (figure 18), which includes two *di* “to give” signs, two *wd3t* “wholeness” eyes, flanking a central *sm3* “unification” sign in the upper register. These signs create the solarising phrase “giving the eye [of Re]” most probably concerning the sun god’s re–creation into a whole being during the hours of night. The lower part of the base decoration includes another *wd3t* eye with two *nfr* “perfect” signs below it, perhaps creating the apotropaic saying, *nfr.wy wd3t*, “how perfect is the eye,” presumably referring to the Eye of Re. Flanking this enclosure are two uraei who protect the rebirth of the sun. The iconography is intentionally complex and dense, allowing the entire solar cycle of damage, restoration, and rebirth of the sun god to be condensed onto the base of a single scarab, providing a clear but also expansive genre of divine representation.



Figures 15–18 (from left to right). Figure 15: cat. no. 3; figure 16: cat. no. 5; figure 17: cat. no. 32; figure 18: cat. no. 45. All photographs © West Semitic Research.

4. Distributed propaganda

On temple walls of the New Kingdom and later, the king is often said to have “made this monument for his father” (*ir.n.f mnw n it.f*; Erman & Grapow, 1926–1931: II, 70), often in reference to the god Amen–Re. The king was responsible for making monuments to keep the gods appeased. He was chief priest and the intermediary between the divine and human worlds. More to the point is whether these duties extended to the production and distribution of small amulets like scarabs. Can we interpret scarabs with representations of state gods and kings as distributed propaganda with a clear socio–political purpose? Should we link political scarab genres with scarab function?

We can be fairly confident that there was a mass market for scarabs, given the numbers of them in museums around the world. Many scarabs were probably made in royal workshops, and distributed to the populace, but clear proof of state production is hard to find in these mobile, typically unprovenanced objects. At best, an insecure circumstantial case can be made, if the amulet is made of a material accommodating high scale production and if the base decoration fits the state agenda. Faience, a common material for scarabs, is a moldable, frit material amenable to higher scale production and could have been produced in larger workshops with a set infrastructure for highly technical work supported by consistent funding (Friedman, 1998). But high technical demands do not rule out private production of or demand for faience pieces. Hermann (1985: v) argues that “Die Vielzahl der Verwendungszwecke der produzierten Fayencen weist darauf hin, dass die Werkstatt wohl nicht nur für eine bestimmte Institution wie Temple oder Königshaus arbeitete, sondern einen viel breiteren Kundenkreis gehabt haben muss, u.a. auch private Kreise.” Nonetheless, Hermann (1985, 1989/1990) notes that many pottery molds used for faience production bear state sanctioned decoration, including king’s names, and that many of the existing examples come from large, possibly state sponsored, workshops of the Ramesside Period at Qantir.⁶ Nicholson & Peltenburg (2000) note evidence of faience factory activity in connection with

⁶ The LACMA collection also owns 81 such pottery molds for faience plaque and scarab production, the vast majority bearing the names of kings and said to come from Qantir. For images of these unpublished objects, see <http://collectionsonline.lacma.org/>.

well-known palaces or state centers, such as Malkata, Amarna, as well as Qantir. It is therefore quite possible that some of the scarabs in the LACMA collection could have been made in a state workshop, even though only circumstantial evidence backs up this conclusion. Cat. no. 6 (figure 19), for instance, reads “The royal wife Tiy,” and is made of faience with a poorly stamped inscription, suggesting that it and others like it were produced quickly and cheaply in great quantities, perhaps by a state funded workshop. Cat. no. 21 (figure 20) is a duck scaraboid, also of faience, bearing the throne name of Hatshepsut on its base. Given the faience material and the fact that it preserves the name of a ruler who fell into ill repute after her reign, this piece was plausibly also produced by a state workshop for distribution during Hatshepsut’s lifetime. A case study of the LACMA collection strongly suggests that some scarabs were made by the state and distributed to members of the population, most likely elite members.

The Hyksos kings, especially, seem to have marshalled the scarab for socio-political purposes, inscribing thousands of them with their names and titles, such as seen on the base of cat. no. 14 (figure 21), representing the throne name of 15th dynasty king Sheshi and reading “The good god Maa-ib-Re, given life.” Another scarab base at LACMA, cat. no. 31 (figure 22), represents another Hyksos king called Nub-ankh-(Re) as the “perfect god,” although in actuality, this is a little known king whose rule did not expand beyond the Nile Delta. This scarab base suggests that such scarabs were used to bolster weak political standing. Given the production quantities, these 15th and 16th dynasty scarabs probably represent the manipulation of small, distributable amulets for political purposes.⁷

However, examination of the LACMA collection also reveals that private demand and private tastes may have driven a market for apotropaic scarab amulets, even including those designs connected with kingship. The king as high priest represents communication with divinity, and his depiction may also have imparted to its owner social status, divine protection, as well as knowledge about his or her place in the social world. For instance, cat. no. 4 (figure 23), made of faience, could have served private amuletic purposes, while still providing the owner with powerful socio-political ties. It depicts the king as a human headed falcon holding a flail, identified as “the good god, chosen of Re.” No king is specified: rather the king is represented generically as the mobile sun priest, the ultimate intermediary.



Figures 19–24 (from left to right, top to bottom). Figure 19: cat. no. 6; figure 20: cat. no. 21; figure 21: cat. no. 14; figure 22: cat. no. 31; figure 23: cat. no. 4; figure 24: cat. no. 8. All photographs © West Semitic Research.

Therefore, as Keel (1990: 202–203) states, on its most superficial level, a royal image on a scarab base might automatically imply propagandistic function or administrative control, but we maintain that the use of a royal representation might also signify the non-royal owner’s attempt to *use* divine Egyptian kingship for his or her own private purposes: first, as a protective device, and second, as a powerful social status marker. Cat. no. 8

⁷ For more on scarabs of the 15th dynasty, see Richards (2001) and Niccacci (1980).

(figure 24), is a very common depiction of the “good god,” or the king, on his barque. Presumably, this scarab granted its owner not only the apotropaic renewal of divine kingship, but also the mark of social position. It is quite probable that non-royal demand may have driven the production of some scarabs; even those examples decorated with royal iconography.

5. Intimate protection

In the later part of the New Kingdom, there seems to have been public demand for protective scarab amulets with divine and royal iconography, as opposed to scarab decoration of personal names and titles. Some focus on solar and yearly rebirth, as in the case of cat. no. 43 (figure 25). Others, such as cat. no. 28 (figure 26), depict the king as the sun priest; here the name of Ramses II is associated with a sun disk and baboon. Other apotropaic scarab amulets represent the king as protector; cat. no. 30 (figure 27) shows the king firing his arrow. Still other protective scarab amulets are connected with the notion of personal piety (Assmann, 2001: 197–198, 224–232, 241–242; Baines, 1987). One especially notable example of personal piety depicted on a scarab, is cat. no. 39 (figure 28) which shows the god Amen facing a falcon wearing the double crown and Ptah in mummiform holding a staff. The triad stands on the *neb* sign for “all.” This poorly carved scarab is probably Ramesside in date and could reflect the theological thought found in the famous hymn from P. Leiden I, 350 (iv: 21–22)⁸: “All the gods are three: Amen, Re, and Ptah, who have no equal. His name is hidden as Amen. He is Re in face. His body is Ptah.” Another LACMA scarab (cat. no. 47, figure 29) bears the inscription “Amen is the strength of one,” again perhaps speaking to the same increasing syncretisation of the Late New Kingdom that linked the god Amen-Re with the source of all divinity.



Figures 25–29 (from left to right). Figure 25: cat. no. 43; figure 26: cat. no. 28; figure 27: cat. no. 30; figure 28: cat. no. 39; figure 29: cat. no. 47. All photographs © West Semitic Research.

The cryptographic use of the names of living and deceased kings on scarab amulets of the New Kingdom underscores the lack of clear division between Egyptian politics and religion (Mann, 1986). Cat. no. 22 (figure 30) depicts a cartouche with the throne name of Thutmose III, flanked by bound Asiatic captives and bows. His throne name Men-kheper-Re can be read cryptographically as Amen-Re (Droiten, 1960), intimately tying this deceased king, and kingship as a whole, to the great god of Thebes. Furthermore, the king is depicted as the agent of protection for the Egyptian population. If this scarab base is ‘read’ according to both of these notions, then the king simultaneously protects Egypt from foreigners, while offering those same foreigners to the god Amen-Re as tribute. When cryptography is included in the reading of scarabs, the different possible meanings multiply. It is highly probable that this was done by intention.

Another scarab, cat. no. 19 (figure 31), made of carved steatite, represents the birth name of Amenhotep I on its base. During the later New Kingdom when this piece was probably made, the owner would probably have associated this object with the deceased and deified Amenhotep I, a god of the Theban west bank and a popular object of pious devotion. This is not an object of distributed propaganda but representative of non-royal demand for objects with this king’s name. Whether this piece was made in a royal or private workshop, assuming that Egyptologists should even claim such a distinction (see Cooney, 2002; Hermann, 1985), a case can be made that non-royal individuals drove the demand for royal names and figures on their amulets. The royal name was increasingly connected with personal piety, either by linking kingship to the deified protection of early 18th dynasty kings like Amenhotep I, or by using other particular kings’ throne names (like Thutmose III or Amenhotep III) to cryptographically write the name of Amen-Re.

⁸ For a translation, see Assmann (2001: 238–239).

Given the multiple meanings provided by cryptography and the overlapping genres, especially those of the later New Kingdom and Third Intermediate Period, it is often difficult to explain why a given piece may have been produced. How was a given scarab perceived by its owner: as a distributed official message of highly placed political and social groups, or as a personal talisman that was part of the religious and aesthetic milieu of private sector social spheres and demand, or all of the above? For example, cat. no. 27 (figure 32) is decorated on its base with the throne name of Seti I and a falcon. It actually has three possible readings. First, literally as “Men–ma’at–Re, Horus is lord (?),” second, cryptographically as “Amen–Re and Horus are Lord (?),” or third, cryptographically as “Amen–Re and Re–Hor[akhty] are lord.” Given the difficulty of actually reading this small composition, this scarab raises a number of questions. Was there only one accepted reading of a given scarab? Could this scarab have been perceived by its owner as both a vehicle of personal piety in addition to being a distributed object with political overtones? It is almost impossible to draw such lines between different types of reception with these scarab amulets. We believe that, more than likely, this layering of interpretation and function was intentional. Perhaps, one should conclude that, if a scarab can be read in more than one way, it was *meant* to retain that flexibility.



Figures 30–32 (from left to right). Figure 30: cat. no. 22; figure 31: cat. no. 19; figure 32: cat. no. 27. All photographs © West Semitic Research.

6. The scarab as a means of social communication

Given these problems of *emic* interpretation and reception, it is perhaps more useful to examine the scarab anthropologically as an amulet: a concrete and material thing that helps humans communicate, process and gain psychological control over events in their world. Throughout history, people have continually used amulets in their attempt to magically influence a given situation. Knuf & Knuf (1984: 126) argue that “Als materielle Objekte fixieren sie das Wirkungsprinzip in Zeit und Raum und machen es damit zugänglich. Dies entspricht essentiellen menschlichen Kommunikationsgewohnheiten. Amulette und Talismane ermöglichen damit den relativ unproblematischen Umgang mit solchen Wirkungsprinzipien in konkreten Situationen und entsprechen damit Bedürfnissen, die wahrscheinlich allgemein–menschlich, universell sind; die Modalitäten solchen Umgangs lassen sich in den verschiedenen Kulturen und Philosophien verfolgen.”

The underside of the scarab amulet provides a small flat surface on which to inscribe figured motifs, geometric designs, and/or hieroglyphic inscriptions, all of which can provide the scarab owner with a means of confronting natural, social, political and supernatural problems. The scarab beetle itself was chosen as a powerful manipulative object by the Egyptians for a number of reasons that will only be discussed briefly here. The scarab as a hieroglyph (*hpr*) means “to come into being.” As a symbol, the scarab represents the regeneration of the sun god every morning, the ultimate symbol of new life and hope. The scarab beetle protects the hearts of deceased individuals, shielding their very soul in the halls of justice. It is also intimately associated with Egyptian political power and its own cycle of regeneration: when the living king died, a new king ideally took his place. One scarab in the LACMA collection, cat. no. 23 (figure 33), is especially representative of the cycle of royal regeneration. One reading is: “May the son of Mut be twice good, Men–kheper–Re the lord.” Because the throne name of Thutmose III can also be read cryptographically as Amen–Re, an alternative reading is produced: “May the son of Mut be twice good, Amen, the lord.” This reading transforms Amen into the son of his own mother Mut, a notion that fits well with the Luxor temple theology of Amen as the Bull of his Mother or Amen–Djeser–a (Bell, 1985). Depicted on this scarab base, the deceased king (here as Thutmose III) has the ability to regenerate himself in the same way as Amen. Both the scarab and the king are, in a sense, ‘self made.’ Ultimately, the scarab amulet is symbolic of the powers of cyclical regeneration: by the sun god as Khepri, by the living king, by the deceased king, by Amen–Re, and presumably, by extension, even by the owner of the amulet who hoped to recover from disease, to recoup economic loss, and to be reborn into the next life. Once again, the scarab has multiple meanings and multiple uses.

Anthropologically, the amulet is a means of communication between the individual and multiple spheres of existence. An amulet helps a person come to terms with his or her natural surroundings, social existence, and supernatural connections. According to Knuf & Knuf (1984: 183), amulets are “[...] eine notwendige Ausdrucksform menschlicher Denkprozesse und Empfindungen. Als kulturelle Objekte dienen sie einem ersten Zweck: Sie verhelfen uns, wie andere Objekte auch, zu einer Orientierung in unserer Umwelt, erlauben es uns, die Lebenswelt in verschiedener Weise, aber doch bindend für die gegebene kulturelle Gemeinschaft, zu ordnen. Sie sind damit Anhaltspunkte für Klassifikationen aller Art, mentale Leitfossilien, die z.B. praktische Verhaltensanweisungen vorgeben können.” The individual can navigate worldly and otherworldly connections through the amulet, a material object that is believed to be magically charged. An examination of the scarab amulets in the LACMA collection reveals that they were intended to facilitate actual or perceived communication between a person and these spheres: between the individual and the king, between an individual and nature, between an individual and society, between an individual and the god(s), and even between an individual and other quasi supernatural powers, such as ghosts and demons.

The scarab itself is a symbol of the natural world, the rising sun, and so it was a means of understanding the cosmos not as a world in stasis, but as an ever continuing cycle of creation. A scarab may have provided its owner with a positive psychological perception of his or her problems, ill-health and ultimately, mortality. The scarab amulet could be used apotropaically: just as the sun rises every morning, despite the horrific dangers described in underworld texts, so can the individual continue through a difficult life, using an amulet to help to protect him or her from harm. For example, cat. no. 33 (figure 34) depicts a monkey playing a lute, an image associated with fertility and protection, as well as implied solar connotations. Cat. no. 36 (figure 35) bears an apotropaic inscription reading “All flourishing and goodness every day,” and it could have been used to affectively communicate the owner’s ideal place in the natural world in relation to supernatural powers. Cat. no. 48 (figure 36) reads: “May you be in festival like Re,” allowing the owner a sense of the same renewal enjoyed by the sun god. Other scarabs at LACMA are very straightforward in their representation of the scarab owner’s relationship to divinity. Cat. no. 49 (figure 37) reads “Amen is (my) protection.” A number of others write the name of Amen in various cryptographic writings. For example, cat. no. 52 (figure 38) may read “Amen-Re is (my) lord.”



Figures 33–38 (from left to right, top to bottom). Figure 33: cat. no. 23; figure 34: cat. no. 33; figure 35: cat. no. 36; figure 36: cat. no. 48; figure 37: cat. no. 49; figure 38: cat. no. 52. All photographs © West Semitic Research.

The scarab can provide many levels of communication in one and the same amulet. One scarab in the LACMA collection (cat. no. 1, figure 39) has a simple inscription on its base reading, “King of Upper and Lower Egypt Men-kheper-Re,” referring again to Thutmose III. When this scarab amulet was in an individual’s possession, its inscription probably represented a connection between that owner and the king, giving the owner innate knowledge of his or her place in the social world. At the same time, we have seen that the name Men-

kheper-re could be read cryptographically as Amen-Re, and so the scarab provided interaction between the scarab owner and the great god of Thebes, the object of devotion and personal piety, especially during the Ramesside Period. In this respect the scarab is a kind of hinge between owner and king, on the one hand, and owner and god, on the other. Moreover, king, god and owner are united by the common touchstone of the scarab.

Anthropologically and psychologically, the amulet is a material manifestation of human emotions like anxiety, uncertainty, doubt, and fear. The amulet is an external means of dealing with internal emotions, and these objects were believed to have healing power, even a kind of placebo affect, when the owner fully trusted in them (Mathews *et al.*, 1998; Rosner, 1999, 2001). Scarabs have numerous interpretational and manipulative possibilities for each individual, and they were ultimately therapeutic when used to confront one's emotions in a ritualised, and thus removed, way. Cat. no. 38 (figure 40) bears a simple but powerful inscription on its base: *w3dt*, meaning "that which flourishes." The symbol is abstract enough to apply to many aspects of a given individual's life. This papyrus hieroglyph inscribed on an amulet provides one means of confronting the world and attempting to manipulate it in one's favour. Cat. no. 40 (figure 41) bears a depiction of the hippopotamus goddess Taweret, protector of women and childbirth. The owner of this amulet effectively marshalled a predatory and dangerous beast of the Nile, in order to change domestic situations for the better.

The scarab amulet was not only used by an individual to confront his or her emotional state, but also to allow the individual to communicate within their larger socio-political world. For example, cat. no. 7 (figure 42) has no iconography associated with personal piety. It depicts the king as a winged sphinx, labelled as "the good god." In many ways, this is an amulet of social control, linking its owner(s) to a larger whole that is necessary for survival in a difficult world. This scarab effectively communicates that individual existence is due to the protection of a strong, living king. It is possible that some scarab amulets actually reinforced the belief that one must give up some individualism in order to gain control over one's surroundings.



Figures 39–42 (from left to right, top to bottom). Figure 39: cat. no. 1; figure 40: cat. no. 38; figure 41: cat. no. 40; figure 42: cat. no. 7. All photographs © West Semitic Research.

Many scarab bases depict only the name of the king, surrounded by simple epithets, including cat. no. 9 (figure 43), which depicts the throne name of Senwosret II and protective signs, and cat. no. 13 (figure 44), which reads "the good god, Wah-ib-Re," referring to the 13th dynasty king Ia-ib. This prevalent royal iconography supplied yet another link to the amuletic function of a scarab as a communicative device. Baines (1995: 6) has remarked "Throughout Egyptian history, discourse in terms of kingship was the essential mode of discussion about the central state and its power, and for long periods it was vital to the presentation of relations between humanity and the cosmos. Culture was defined in terms of kingship; no centrally sanctioned alternative existed." The numerous depictions of the king on scarabs constituted a potent amuletic method of linking non-royal individuals to larger socio-political concerns. The scarab is, therefore, an ideal amulet of communication for the ancient Egyptian agrarian, complex society. First, the symbolism of this particular amulet rests on a few key notions: cosmic rebirth and the idea that the king is the son of Re and chief priest or intermediary. Second, the scarab amulet is mobile and distributable, making it amenable to various propagandistic agenda as well as

inheritance. Third, the amulet itself is small, intimate, and in private ownership, allowing the possessor a personal connection to the cosmos. The owner may have played a role in the choice of inscription, driving a socio-economic and religious demand for particular amulets. The scarab could therefore connect personal piety to its larger social context, creating a useful tool to manipulate one's world psychologically, without being subversive or unduly individualistic.

The scarab amulet was an especially useful communicative tool with regards to the tensions created by a divine kingship. The scarabs in the LACMA collection sometimes show a dialogue between ideal kingship and the political reality. Cat. no. 12 (figure 45) bears the inscription "the good god, born of the royal mother Kemi, Neferhotep," providing this 13th dynasty king with a human mother, a woman important enough politically to be mentioned in this sacred context. Another scarab (cat. no.16, figure 46) reads "the good god, Sekha-en-Re," placing a foreign Hyksos king of the 15th dynasty in an Egyptian solar context. This amulet and the many other similar scarabs from the same time period transform the messy political situation of foreign incursion during the Second Intermediate Period into the ideal Egyptian kingship; at least from the point of view of the amulet's distributors, and perhaps also some of their owners.

Many New Kingdom scarabs include the names of long deceased and deified kings, like Thutmose III or Amenhotep III, both of whose throne names can be read cryptographically as that of Amen-Re (see, for example, cat. no. 24, figure 47). In one significant example, cat. no. 26 (figure 48), the throne name of Seti I is depicted *outside* a cartouche next to the throne name of Thutmose III, which is placed *inside* a cartouche. This scarab amulet provides a means of communicating the ideals of kingship to the scarab owner: it shows the Ramesside veneration of a deceased and divine king as well as of the god Amen, if Men-kheper-Re is read cryptographically as that god's name. In a sense, this scarab amulet puts king Seti I in his own place in the cosmos as the living king who should show deference towards deceased god-kings as well as towards "great gods," like Amen-Re. Such a multi-faceted interpretation solves the conundrum of the divine yet earthly king for the scarab owner. The scarab amulet could therefore be used as a tool to understand political reality through the lens of cosmic renewal. It is as amenable to a propaganda campaign as it is to true personal expressions of personal piety.



Figures 43–48 (from left to right, top to bottom). Figure 43: cat. no. 9; figure 44: cat. no. 13; figure 45: cat. no. 12; figure 46: cat. no. 16; figure 47: cat. no. 24; figure 48: cat. no. 47. All photographs © West Semitic Research.

7. Conclusion

The meaning and function of the scarab, the scarab amulet and the inscriptions on the scarab amulet are complex and multi-various. In fact, meaning and function can only be examined by broadening our investigatory criteria outside of the norm (typological and categorical) to include semiotic, anthropological and psychological factors.

An analysis of the scarab's anthropological and psychological influence grants a more profound understanding of the scarab as a powerful social tool, not only tied to personal religious beliefs, but also to state propaganda, as well as state cultic powers, *i.e.*, the king and his cosmic, ritualistic role in ancient Egyptian cosmology and society. Moreover, semiotic analysis further strengthens the scarab's reception as a strong apotropaic symbol. Abstraction and layered complexity of symbols are a necessity given the small amount of decorative space that the scarab provides. The multiple grammatical and symbolic meanings of these abstractions only had full significance to the producers and the intended audience. In fact, this examination indicates that these meanings seem purposely intended to fulfill multiple functions at one and the same time.

This case study of the LACMA collection shows that scarabs can be viewed as a convenient, portable and highly effective means of accomplishing numerous social, religious and political tasks. As is the case with so much of Egyptian thought, a scarab is tiny and expansive simultaneously, saying so very much in something so very small.

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