

Gems & Jewellery

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BRAZILIAN CREOLE
JEWELLERY

BLACK IN JEWELRY
COALITION

ANCIENT EGYPTIAN
FUNERARY AMULETS

CASTRO NYC
EXHIBITION



Gem-A
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The wedjat eye was a common theme for funerary amulets. The lapis lazuli plaque (left) dates to the Late Period.

This Egyptian faience (below) from the Late Period/Ptolemaic Period inlay is a composite hieroglyph, termed the 'Horus of Gold'. The falcon god Horus sits on top of the sign for gold, a collar with ties. This sign appears before one of the royal names, called the 'Horus of Gold name'.

journey to the afterlife. In the Weighing of the Heart ceremony, the deceased person's heart – the seat of their life-spirit – was measured on a scale against Maat's feather. Hearts heavier than the feather were rejected and eaten by Ammit, the 'Devourer of Souls'.

Amulets were believed to protect their owners from daily misfortune while providing aid and protection on the hazardous journey to and within the Other World. Hence, they played an essential role in funerary rituals. Three of the four Egyptian words translated as 'amulet' (*meket*, *nehet* and *sa*) come primarily from verbs meaning 'to guard' or 'to protect'. The fourth, *wedja*, has the same sound as the word for 'well-being' (Andrews, 1994). Many of the amulets and jewellery worn in life could be worn

LAPIS LAZULI, TURQUOISE AND FAIENCE AS SERVANTS OF MAAT:

FUNERARY AMULETS

IN ANCIENT EGYPT

Sandrine Martin explores the use and importance of blue gems, along with a unique manmade material, in amulets made for burial rituals in ancient Egypt.

Birthplace of the oldest-known civilisation in Africa and continuing until it was absorbed into the Roman Empire in 30 BCE, Egypt was home to one of the most sophisticated societies in antiquity. Ancient Egyptian culture centred on Maat, which was the name of a goddess as well as a word that encompasses several concepts, such as cosmic order, truth, justice and righteousness

(Andrews, 1994). The hieroglyphic sign for Maat is a feather, and the goddess Maat is usually depicted with the feather hieroglyph on her head. Maintaining the cosmic harmony, thus ensuring order in the universe and perpetuating the cycles of nature was essential to the Egyptians. Performing rituals and offerings to the gods were part of achieving this goal. Maat, therefore, played a central role in the



in the afterlife. However, funerary amulets (and jewellery) were expressly made for setting on the wrapped mummy on the day of burial (Andrews, 1994). Amulets are accounted for starting in the Predynastic Period and continuing through the Roman Period (see table on p33 for dates). Their use increased during the New Kingdom, peaking in the Late Period (Ikram and Dodson, 1998; Stünkel, 2019).

Praised by the ancient civilisations for its dazzling and intense colour, lapis lazuli was the most-precious gemstone of the ancient Near East and Egypt.

Archaeological discoveries attest that, as funerary practices evolved, so did the materials of the amulets used (Muñoz Pérez, 2018). Metals and minerals were considered to carry divine essence. Gold, silver and electrum, as well lapis lazuli, turquoise, carnelian, jasper and manmade faience, were used in amulets as representations of the gods. Along with their shape, colour and iconography, the materials used guaranteed the magical power of amulets (Ikram and Dodson, 1998). Symbolically tied to birth, life, regeneration and resurrection, turquoise, lapis lazuli and faience were important materials in ancient Egyptian funerary amulets.

UNDERSTANDING THE EGYPTIAN CHROMATIC UNIVERSE

Egyptologist Bernard Mathieu (2009) writes that “The word ‘colour’ as it is understood today did

not exist in the hieroglyph lexicon. At least two words could be translated to mean ‘colour’: *jnm* and *jwn*.” The first of these terms refers to both a material and to the ‘tactile aspect of a surface,’ while the other may mean ‘pelage/coat’. “Both *jnm* and *jwn* could be used to refer to a person’s ‘complexion’ or ‘behaviour’. Ancient Egyptians thereby attributed to colours a symbolic value correlating to their perception of the natural phenomena they saw in these colours: the yellow of the Sun, the green of vegetation, the black of fertile earth and the red of the desert” (Mathieu, 2009).

For most of its history, according to Pinch (2001), the Egyptian language had only four basic (non-specific) colour terms: *km* (black), *hd* (white), *dr* (red) and *w* (green/blue). Mathieu (2009) indicated that the meaning of *w* is ‘fresh’, suggesting the quality of freshness and humidity, along with viridity, growth or rawness. As such, *w* is the colour of life. As it frequently refers to the vegetal world, notably to the stem of papyrus and to liquid bodies, ‘green’ is a derived meaning of *w*. Therefore, *w* refers to all shades of colours from green to blue.

To the ancient Egyptians, turquoise was considered a mineral extension of *wahdj*[†]. When written with the determinant for minerals — three sand grains — *wahdj* was the word used for malachite. Geographically associated, but also organically and chromatically related, the Egyptians brought the two gems together within a complementary system. With copper as part of the composition of both malachite and turquoise, these products of the Sinai show different shades of green, and were therefore both considered to be *wahdj* (Mathieu, 2009).



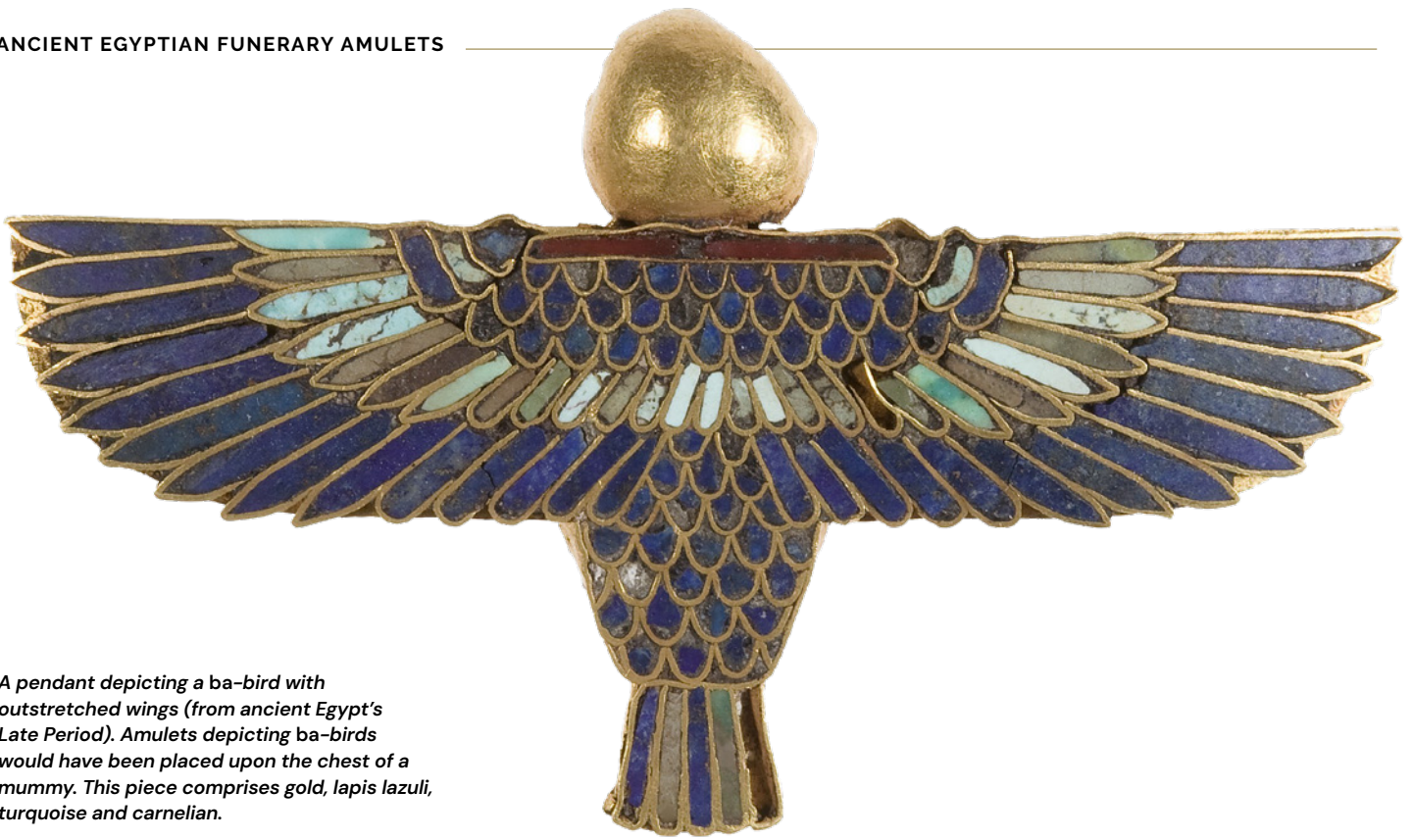
A Thoth amulet, made from lapis lazuli, dating to ancient Egypt's Late Period.

Wahdj was also the colour of the ‘wedjat eye’, which represents the healed eye of the god Horus and the most popular and powerful amulet of ancient Egypt. It embodied healing power and symbolised vitality, rebirth, regeneration and protection. The goddess Hathor, called the ‘Lady of Turquoise’, is also linked with the *wedjat*.

SOURCES AND HISTORY

Mineral production was considered the province of gods such as Geb, owner of all the wealth of the underground. “Verbs such as *prj* and *bsj* — ‘coming out’ and ‘emerging’, respectively — were used

[†] See p. 34, ‘Colour Concept in Ancient Egypt.’

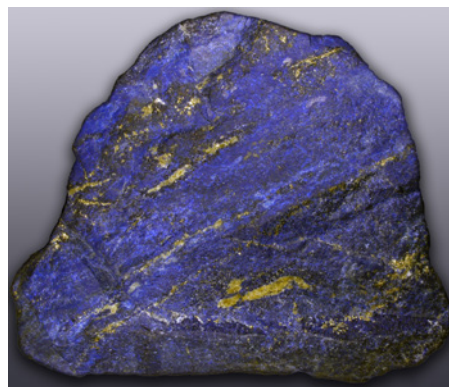


A pendant depicting a ba-bird with outstretched wings (from ancient Egypt's Late Period). Amulets depicting ba-birds would have been placed upon the chest of a mummy. This piece comprises gold, lapis lazuli, turquoise and carnelian.

to describe the formation of minerals, indicating that they 'grew' under the influence of some powerful force." Aufrère (1997) noted that "Going to the desert, home of the forces generating cosmic disorder (and of the gem mines), was one of the ways of maintaining Maat, whose figurine was made of lapis lazuli. From these mines were also extracted gold, the gods' flesh, silver, the divine bones, the iron of Seth, the magnetite of Horus and turquoise evoking cosmic motherhood."

Turquoise. Known as *mafkat* – a term which also referred to copper and malachite – turquoise was a rare, precious commodity in ancient Egypt. Connected with fertility and vegetation, as well as with joy, creation and life itself, its unique light blue-green colour was much valued. Fashioned into small objects such as beads, turquoise was also used in gold jewellery and divine offerings, including funerary amulets.

Turquoise may have been known to the Egyptians before 5500 BCE, but the earliest evidence of mining, by Bedouin clans of the Sinai, come from fragments of high-quality turquoise found in tombs in the El-Qaa region dating to ~5000 BCE (Schorsch, 2018). Located in the southwest Sinai Peninsula, the most important ancient mines were Wadi Maghara (known to the ancient Egyptians as the 'Terraces of Turquoise')



Turquoise (left) and lapis lazuli (right) were both used in ancient Egyptian funerary amulets and objects, due to the 'divine essence' imbued in the minerals by several of their properties. Photos courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

and Serabit el-Khadim, where turquoise was mined in antiquity. Wadi Maghara, a modern-day archaeological site, contains pharaonic monuments and turquoise mines from the Old and New Kingdoms.

The interactions between Egypt and Sinai evolved under Sneferu (ca. 2600 BCE), the founding pharaoh of the Fourth Dynasty who was looked upon in later ages as one of the Sinai's protecting divinities. As civilisation developed, the Sinai sources of turquoise, along with its malachite and copper ores, became more important. This was especially true during the Middle Kingdom. Large-scale activity resumed during the reign of Hatshepsut (r. 1479–1458 BCE), the first female ruler of ancient Egypt with the full authority of pharaoh, who reopened the Wadi Maghara mines. At the time of resumed mining activity, Wadi Maghara had not been worked for nearly four hundred years.

The workers dedicated the work to Hathor – the goddess of turquoise and lapis lazuli, as well as malachite, gold, copper and miners – and built temples in her honour. As the goddess of the Sinai, Hathor was also the protector of desert regions. "It is by praying to the goddess Hathor, the Lady of Turquoise, and surrendering to her divine will that the miner will receive the inspiration to discover the mother lode from which he will draw exceptional benefit" (Aufrère, 1997). The last pharaoh to operate

Turquoise was a rare and precious commodity in ancient Egypt, connected with fertility and vegetation, as well as with joy, creation and life itself.

the mines and leave an inscription at Serabit el-Khadim was Ramses VI (r. ~1145–1137 BCE). The mines were exhausted and abandoned, as was the temple of Hathor, after the Twentieth Dynasty (Khazeny, 2014).

Lapis Lazuli. Praised in antiquity for its dazzling and intense colour, lapis lazuli was the most valuable gemstone of the ancient Near East and Egypt. Referred to by Greek philosopher Theophrastus (ca. 372–287 BCE) as 'sappir spotted with gold', lapis lazuli was traded by the Aryans from the mines of Badakhshan (modern-day Afghanistan) east to Mesopotamia and Egypt. This trade began as early as the second half of the fourth millennium BCE. Nestled in the centre of the Hindu-Kush Mountains, the Sar-E-Sang mines are one of the oldest sources of lapis and historically

PERIODS OF ANCIENT EGYPTIAN CIVILISATION*

Predynastic Period and Early Dynastic Period

~5000–2675 BCE

Old Kingdom

~2700–2200 BCE

First Intermediate Period

~2200–2050 BCE

Middle Kingdom

~2050–1800 BCE

Second Intermediate Period

~1650–1550 BCE

New Kingdom

~1550–1100 BCE

Third Intermediate Period

~1100–665 BCE

Late Period

~665–332 BCE

Argead Dynasty

332–310 BCE

Ptolemaic Dynasties

310–30 BCE

Roman and Byzantine Egypt

30 BCE–641 CE

*Dates are approximate



A lapis lazuli heart amulet dating from ancient Egypt's Late Period.

delivered the finest-quality material (Bancroft, 1984). Mesopotamia was the commercial centre for this material. From there, lapis continued its journey to Egypt during the Predynastic Period, as well as all early dynasties.

Lapis lazuli was called *hsbd* ('heaven' or 'blue stone') in the ancient Egyptian language. Referred to as 'lapis lazuli' or by the epithet 'lady of lapis lazuli', the goddesses Isis, Hathor and Nut are closely tied to the gem. Most of the male deities aligned with Horus bear the name *Hsbd*, connecting them with lapis lazuli as well (Aufrère, 1991). One of the oldest and most significant deities of the Egyptian pantheon, Horus – the son of Osiris and Isis – was affiliated with the sky, the Sun, kingship and protection, and was commonly depicted as a falcon or as a falcon-headed man. In turn, the pharaohs were regarded as the earthly embodiment of Horus. Lapis lazuli ornaments were an honour reserved for princes and divinities. Such representations, along with their ownership, were an indication of political and religious power (Casanova, 2001).



THE CONCEPT OF COLOUR IN ANCIENT EGYPT

'Blue'

Notions and perceptions of 'colour' are not universal. 'For several millennia [blue] was considered in the West only as a black of a particular type' (Pastoureau, 1990). The equivalent of the modern 'blue' is non-existent in the Pyramid Texts, the oldest ancient Egyptian funerary texts reserved for the pharaoh, dating to the Old Kingdom.

The colour for lapis lazuli – *hsbd* – was conceived as a variant of black. Notably used for divine hair, it had eminently positive connotations.

Azurite – *tfr*



Lapis lazuli – *hsbd*



'Green' and 'Blue-Green'

Symbolically linked with notions of virility, fertility and growth, *wahdj* was the colour of freshness and humidity, vegetation and new life.

The hieroglyph for green is a papyrus stem and frond. Doing 'green things' was adopting a positive behaviour, asserting life itself. Together with black, it was the colour of resurrection.

Wahdj



Malachite



Turquoise



Colour swatches courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

From this context comes the belief, widespread in the Near East and Egypt in the third and second millennia BCE, that "to possess a plot of lapis lazuli is to possess a plot of the divine" (Aufrère, 1997). Casanova (2001) noted that the relationship between lapis lazuli, great gods, supernatural vital energy and the sky/Heaven is inseparable from various shades of blue, thanks to the symbolism associated with the colour (which was considered a variant of black, a colour which was considered positive by the ancient Egyptians). According to Aufrère (1991), "The reasons for the craze for this mineral lie solely in its colour and the inclusion in its mass of small fragments of gold, which facilitated its assimilation with the night or the starry sky."

Faience. Known as early as the end of the fifth millennium BCE, Egyptian faience (or faience) may have been developed to simulate highly prized, rare blue stones. The Egyptian method, which involved the sintering of quartz over an object to produce a glassy and colourful coating, differed from

tin-glazed pottery style of faience popularised in the Middle Ages.

The ancient Egyptian word for faience, *tjehnet*, means 'brilliant' or 'scintillating'. One of the most popular manmade materials used for amulets,



faience could be produced in the shades of green and blue that were associated with life and regeneration (Stünkel, 2019). The shiny, bright-blue glaze of this manmade vitreous material symbolically granted precious objects life, viridity, fertility and eternity.

Linked with the ever-rising gleaming sun and the idea of rebirth, objects created with faience were considered magical by ancient Egyptians. Faience was also inlaid into furniture and into walls as tomb and temple decoration (Riccardelli, 2017). Fishnets made of blue faience, on which funerary amulets were hung, were placed over mummies from the Late and Greco-Roman Periods (Andrews 1994).

FUNERARY AMULETS OF ANCIENT EGYPT

According to Aufrère (1991), lapis lazuli represented the night and the cosmic immensity, as well as a principle of possible regeneration, while turquoise was tied to nocturnal light and connoted union, future parturition, the joy of birth and rebirth. Faience

As funerary practices evolved, so did the materials of the amulets used in those practices.

represented the glow of the stars and was always considered a good omen. All three materials acted as potent materials in the funerary trousseau.

Usually placed close to the body between the mummy's bandages (Albert, 2012), amulets depicted animals, deities and objects in miniature. A large number of amulets showed deities and in their chosen animal-manifested form. Both turquoise

This amulet of the goddess Maat, carved from lapis lazuli, dates from the Late Period of ancient Egypt's civilisation. When found on a mummy, the Maat amulet is on the chest (Andrews, 1994).



Another example of the wedjat eye theme for funerary amulets, this Egyptian faience amulet is from the Third Intermediate Period.

(stone and colour) and lapis lazuli were used in scarab beetle artefacts, which symbolised the eternal life/rebirth cycle. Worn as a form of protection, the scarab was a symbol of the sun god Re. The scarab amulet became an essential element of the funeral trousseau by the New Kingdom Period. It was intended to restore to the deceased the use of his heart, not as a vital organ but as a seat of thought (Ziegler, 1999). The heart, or *ib*, was the most essential organ to the Egyptians. The seat of intelligence and the storehouse of memory, it was the originator of all feelings and actions. Winged scarabs were also extremely popular funerary amulets that were intended to guarantee the rebirth of the deceased. Consisting of three pieces – an actual scarab beetle

and two separate bird wings – each of which was fastened to the wrappings of a mummy.

Thoth, the god of the moon and of wisdom, was usually represented in human form with the head of an ibis. Scribe, interpreter and adviser of the gods, he is also the representative of Re. Thoth amulets had a purely funerary connotation (Andrews, 1994), as Thoth weighed the hearts of the deceased at their judgment and reported the result to the presiding god Osiris and his judges. Thoth's sacred animals were the ibis and the baboon, particularly the latter. The vignette to chapter 125 of the Book of the Dead, depicting the weighing of the heart, occasionally shows Thoth recording the result of the weighing in his baboon form (Andrews, 1994).



A lapis lazuli ba amulet dating from ancient Egypt's Late Period.



*A lapis lazuli falcon amulet from the
Late Period/Ptolemaic Dynasties
era of Egyptian history.*





This glazed steatite scarab, inscribed 'Hatsheput, United with Amun', was found in Hatsheput's funerary temple at Deir el-Bahri in Western Thebes. It dates to Egypt's Eighteenth Dynasty (New Kingdom period).

Associated with several prominent gods, the falcon was believed to provide protection from the malevolence of Seth, god of the desert, disorder and violence (Andrews, 1994). The falcon was revered as the king's guardian and a representation of Re, thought of as the first pharaoh of ancient Egypt. Re was also the god of order, kings and the sky who ruled in all parts of the created world, including the Underworld. Re shared characteristics with Horus, who was also portrayed as a falcon. Another association with Horus on funeral objects was the Eye of Horus, a symbol of healing, protection and regeneration. In Egyptian mythology, Horus was told by his mother, Isis, to protect the people of Egypt from his uncle Seth, who had killed Horus' father, Osiris. Horus' eye was injured or stolen by Seth, and restored by another deity (either Thoth or Hathor). The *wedjat* eye thus became the embodiment of healing power and a potent symbol of rebirth.

The *ba*, or 'the immaterial manifestation of a human being' was a link between the world of the dead and that of the living. Depicted as a human-bird hybrid – a combination that represented its ability to travel to different realms – the *ba* travelled across the sky in the sun god's boat and witnessed the weighing of the heart in the underworld (Andrews, 1994). *Ba*-bird amulets were placed on the chest of a mummy, though amulets in the shape of a *ba* with outstretched wings do not appear before the interment of Tutankhamun.

Death was considered a continuation of life in the religion of the ancient Egyptians. However, entry into the afterlife was not guaranteed. The deceased had to face a perilous journey before facing the Final Judgment ceremony. Only those whose hearts were found to be lighter than the feather of Maat would be admitted into the Underworld.

Funerary amulets, intended to confer their protection to the deceased, played a crucial role throughout this journey. These amulets relied upon their materials and colours, as well as their shape and symbols, for their power. Considered divine gifts by ancient Egyptians, lapis lazuli and turquoise embodied resurrection and life. These qualities made the blue gems – along with the faience created to mimic their powerful properties – potent materials to use on the funerary amulets that accompany the deceased through the afterlife. ■

All photos courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art unless otherwise indicated.

A list of references is available upon contacting the Editor.

This article is part of a longer piece that ran under the title 'Celestial Turquoise' on the author's website.



A ring from ancient Egypt's Middle Kingdom period uses a small, uninscribed turquoise scarab. This ring would have been worn as a protective amulet or as a piece of jewellery.