



Artefact Review: W221 by Bethany Saunders

W221 is a square plaque made of faience, depicting the sacred 'wedjat' eye in relief (commonly known as the Eye of Horus, or alternatively the Eye of Ra).¹

The plaque is 8.7cm (height) x 10.3cm (width) x 1.3cm (depth).² It was donated by the Wellcome Trustees to the Egypt Centre in February 1971; it became part of Wellcome's collection after he had purchased it in July 1922 from the MacGregor collection.³ It currently resides in the 'Amulets' case in the House of Death.

There is no specified date nor provenance for W221; records for the wedjat begin in the Old Kingdom and continue onto the Roman period, so the dating for such a common symbol could be an issue.⁴ However, similar glazed plaques with high relief first appeared in the Third Intermediate Period.⁵ Additionally, this period saw an increase in non-royal objects incorporating mythological motifs, and amulets in the form of deities were more common. Sacred eye amulets in particular became key objects).⁶

The wedjat has become one of the most well recognisable phylactic amulets from ancient Egypt. It combines the human feature of brows with the stylised markings of a falcon: an uncurling spiral is depicted before the shape of a teardrop attempting to imitate the feather pattern.⁷

The orientation makes it clear that W221 was intended to represent the right eye. In theory, the wedjat is usually identified as the left, lunar eye of the falcon headed god Horus, whilst the right is considered the solar Eye of Ra.⁸ However, there are many interchanges between the left and right eye and such confusion led to the Eye of Horus and the Eye of Ra having



Figure 1- W221 in the 'Amulets' case in the House of Death.

¹ See Figure 1.

² Egypt Centre Object File.

³ Egypt Centre Object File.

⁴ Andrews, C. (1994) 43.

⁵ Andrews, C. (1994) 44.

⁶ Pinch, G. (2004) 107-108 & 131.

⁷ Andrews, C. (2016) 95.

⁸ Andrews, C. (2016) 96; Pinch, G. (2004) 90.

various interpretations as they were not always clearly distinguished, even by the Egyptians themselves.⁹ Both sacred eyes were protective, lost and restored by Thoth in mythology and viewed as the sun and moon respectively. Therefore, the left eye was commonly transposed with the right to show lunar manifestations on the solar eye.¹⁰ However, the Eye of Ra is well attested as a goddess and wandering daughter of the sun, thus the resulting combination of these views led to dual amulets representing the wedjat and solar goddess.¹¹

Common confusion determines the right eye to be the Eye of Horus, as shown within the catalogue entry for 26.7.1032 (MMA), dating to the Third Intermediate Period at the time which produced the most elaborate eye amulets.¹² However, this amulet is most likely associated with Ra instead. The two uraei possibly refer to the return of the wandering goddess to her father, who was then placed on Ra's forehead as the fire spitting cobra i.e. the uraeus.¹³ The goddess was played by various lion headed deities who had a fierce side to their character, like Sekhmet and Bastet in lion form when she embodied the sun's vengeful eye.¹⁴ Therefore, the lion and uraei hold connections to Ra.

It can be assumed that W221 follows the mythology of Horus due to the absence of solar associations to Ra, allowing it to be identified as the left lunar eye (i.e. the wedjat) despite its orientation. One can also identify W221 as the wedjat by its material, and the associations of faience with rebirth and therefore Osiris and Horus.

The mythological narrative is as follows:

Horus, son of Osiris and Isis, attempted to avenge his father's death through a series of battles against Seth (the god of chaos and violence) for the throne of Egypt, which resulted in the destruction of the sky god's eye.¹⁵ It is restored by Thoth (the moon god of wisdom and mediator in the conflict), but alternative versions commit to Isis as the healer.¹⁶ The restored eye became represented as a symbol of wholeness and healing, as well as maintaining a protective nature through the prevention of harmful forces that threaten one's wellbeing.¹⁷ It is known as the 'complete' or 'sound' eye, and this symbolism allowed



(Fig 2- The "wedjat eye amulet". 26.7.1032. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000)

⁹ Egypt Centre Information Sheet.

¹⁰ Andrews, C. (2016) 98.

¹¹ Darnell, J. (1997) 35.

¹² Pinch, G. (2004) 108; See Figure 2; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000. Retrieved from <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/561047?searchField=All&sortBy=Relevance&ft=eye+of+horus&offset=0&rpp=20&pos=1>.

¹³ Pinch, G. (2004) 90.

¹⁴ Andrews, C. (2016) 97.

¹⁵ Pinch, G. (2004) 10-11.

¹⁶ Pinch, G. (2004) 96.

¹⁷ Andrews, C. (2016) 96.

the wedjat to become one of the most powerful and omnipresent amulets in Egypt.¹⁸ As the lunar eye, the wedjat was also thought to represent the monthly destruction of the moon, which caused cosmic disorder until Thoth restored it.¹⁹ Therefore, the waning and waxing of the moon reflected the eye's injury and healing.

W221 is made of faience, a common blue-green material that resembled the brilliance of valuable gemstones such as turquoise and lapis lazuli.²⁰ Its radiance gave faience divine qualities symbolic of rebirth and fertility, thus associating it with the blue haired goddess Hathor, the patron of the material whom gained the epithets 'mistress of turquoise' and 'mistress of faience'.²¹ The Egyptian name for faience was "*tjehnet*" meaning 'that which is brilliant' or scintillating, due to its glistening qualities and connection with light, thereby associated with life and immortality.²² The colour of faience held significance, by showing magically potent iconography and regenerative symbolism. The mixture is temperamental and complicated shapes proved inconsistent, so amulets were easier to produce with their simplistic design, leading to mass production.²³ As a square plaque with carved relief, W221 would have been a common example.

The wedjat had important use in funerary contexts to aid the dead as a protective amulet. Plates bearing the eye were attached to the bandages of mummies through the four holes in the corners. They were placed on the mouth and from the New Kingdom, over the embalming wound where the abdominal evisceration incision was made to remove the organs.²⁴ Prior to this it was placed on the chest.²⁵ This was believed to heal the wound so the body was made whole whilst preventing malign influences invading, thus preserving the deceased in a perfect, idealised state and ensuring safe passage into the afterlife.²⁶ These protective qualities derive from the Osiris myth, whereby Horus offered his healed eye to restore his father, making the wedjat a powerful protective charm representative of rebirth.²⁷ The sacred eye was probably the commonest motif to have been found on mummies, more than any other amulet, and the eye amulets constitute the largest collection of amulets accumulated.²⁸

¹⁸ Pinch, G. (2004) 97.

¹⁹ El-Saeed, E. (2016) 117.

²⁰ Nicholson, P. T & Peltenburg, E. (2009) 186.

²¹ Friedman, F. D. (1998) 15.

²² Friedman, F. D. (1998) 15.

²³ Nicholson, P. T. & Peltenburg, E. (2009) 187.

²⁴ Ikram, S. & Dodson, A. (1998) 138.

²⁵ Ikram, S. & Dodson, A. (1998) 138.

²⁶ Andrews (1994) 43; Pinch, G. (2004) 90.

²⁷ Andrews, C. (2016) 96.

²⁸ Andrews, C. (2016) 95.

Useful Reading

Andrews, C. (1994). *Amulets of Ancient Egypt*. London: British Museum Press.

Andrews, C. (2016). A most uncommon amulet. In A. Chamberlain, R. Forshaw, P. Nicholson & C. Price (Eds), *Mummies, Magic and Medicine in Ancient Egypt* (pp.95-101). Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Darnell, J. (1997). The Apotropaic Goddess in the Eye. *Studien Zur Altägyptischen Kultur*, 24, 35-48.

Egypt Centre Information Sheets: Amulets.

Egypt Centre Object File.

El- Saeed, E. (2016). Magico- medical aspects of the mythology of Osiris. In A. Chamberlain., R. Forshaw., P. Nicholson & C. Price (Eds), *Mummies, Magic and Medicine in Ancient Egypt* (pp.115-123). Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Friedman, F. D. (1998). Faience: The Brilliance of Eternity. In F. D. Friedman (Ed), *Gifts of the Nile: Ancient Egyptian Faience* (pp. 15-21). New York: Thames and Hudson.

Ikram, S. & Dodson, A. (1998). *The Mummy in Ancient Egypt: Equipping the Dead for Eternity*. New York: Thames and Hudson.

Nicholson, P.T. & Peltenburg, E. (2009). Egyptian faience. In Nicholson, P.T. and Shaw, I. *Ancient Egyptian Materials and Technology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 177-194.

Pinch, G. (2004). *Egyptian Myth: A Very Short Introduction*. Very Short Introductions 106. Oxford: Oxford University Press.