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Maria Antoinette Evans Fund

Giovanni di Paolo

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Amulets of the Late Period

Note on Some Recent Accessions to the Egyptian Department

THE Royal Cemetery of the Cheops Family at Giza, on which the Harvard University-Museum of Fine Arts Expedition has been working since 1924, includes numerous remains of Saite-Ptolemaic date. The pyramid field, containing the colossal tombs of the monarchs of the Fourth Dynasty as well as the pyramids of their queens and great numbers of the mastaba tombs of princes of the family, was regarded in later ages as a place of peculiar sanctity, the earthly resting place of the superhuman god-kings of a mythical past. In the Twenty-sixth Dynasty or Saite Period, an age when the Egyptians were particularly given to harking back to their great past and during which we see a marked tendency to revive ancient practices and to imitate ancient forms, a temple dedicated to Isis of the Pyramids was built in the heart of the sacred precincts, a temple which acquired peculiar sanctity due to its position, and in the neighborhood of which the well-to-do had their tombs constructed that they might be near the goddess in death and be the companions of the mighty dead of past ages. These tombs of the Late Period have yielded a considerable number of the small amulets which are such a characteristic part of the funerary equipment of the age, and it is to a discussion of their evolution and significance that this note is devoted.

The term amulet, as applied to ancient Egypt, means an object which is intended to protect the wearer from evil either specific or general, to ensure him the favor of a particular deity, or to supply certain benefits to him. The belief in its magic effect is based on the feeling very general among primitive people that a mysterious power is inherent in inanimate objects, due to their shape or material or both. The basic human instinct back of the belief in amulets is by no means dead in the modern world. The rabbit's foot, the lucky penny, and mascots of various sorts are but some of the manifestations of it with which we are all familiar.

The Egyptians wore amulets from the earliest times, and since they believed that the life after death was a duplicate of the earthly life with the same needs and desires, they provided their dead with an equipment such as would be needed by a living person, including amulets. Thus it is perfectly natural that amulets should be found in graves at all periods, just as are ornaments and objects of daily use. The rôle played by amulets in the tombs of the Late Period, however, is much greater than in earlier times. They are made especially for burial with the dead and their number and variety are greatly increased to the exclusion of almost every other class of object, a fact due to a gradual development of Egyptian burial customs which I shall attempt briefly to trace.

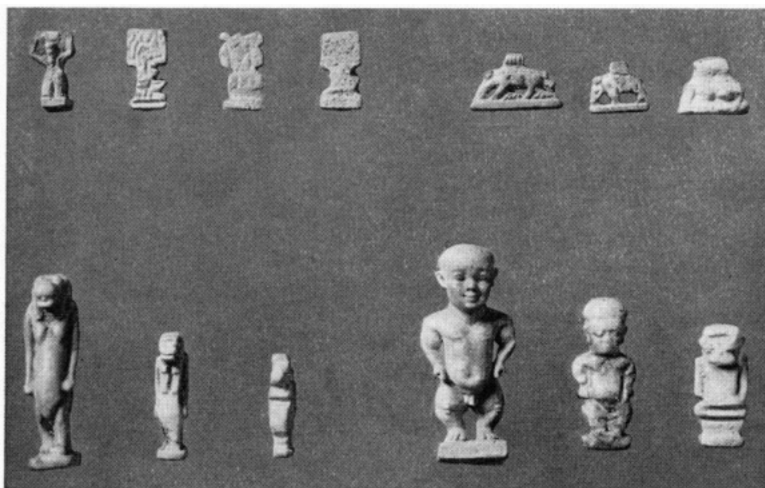
At the dawn of history we find the Egyptians preoccupied with providing for the material needs of their dead. The tombs are equipped with



Fig. 1. *Nefertum (faience)*

From Giza

supplies of food and drink and weapons are laid ready so that the deceased may replenish these supplies by the chase as well as protect himself from attack. He is also furnished with an outfit of household utensils necessary to his comfort. A few amulets such as he was accustomed to wear in life, ornaments for his person, and toilet requisites completed the furniture of his tomb. By the Pyramid Age certain developments due to the growth of technical skill have taken place. Not only do the tombs, which are the houses of the dead, become larger and better built, but their walls are covered with pictures of daily life representing scenes of agriculture, the chase, the various utilitarian occupations of man, and the bringing of offerings to the tomb. Their whole intent, by a sort of magic power which makes them living realities to the dead man's soul, is to complete the provision of all things needful to his future happiness. While it was feasible to bury in the tomb real joints of meat and real jars of beer in limited quantity, the pictures made it possible to ensure to the dead man a much more abundant supply of these things as well as the means of replenishment through the activities of the peasants and craftsmen who, in the scenes, perpetually produced a fresh supply. So, too, the development of writing was turned to practical use for the dead man. His name was what distinguished him from the host of other spirits in the hereafter, and it was only through its use that the offerings made at his tomb could be assured of reaching their proper destination. No greater calamity could befall a man than to wander nameless through eternity, cold, hungry, and without protection. The inscription of the name on the tomb, "causing his name to live," ensured its survival, and writing further made possible the perpetuation of the offering formulæ which were necessary to his enjoyment of the provisions made for his needs. In these modern days of widespread

Fig. 2. *Variations in Workmanship*

Faience

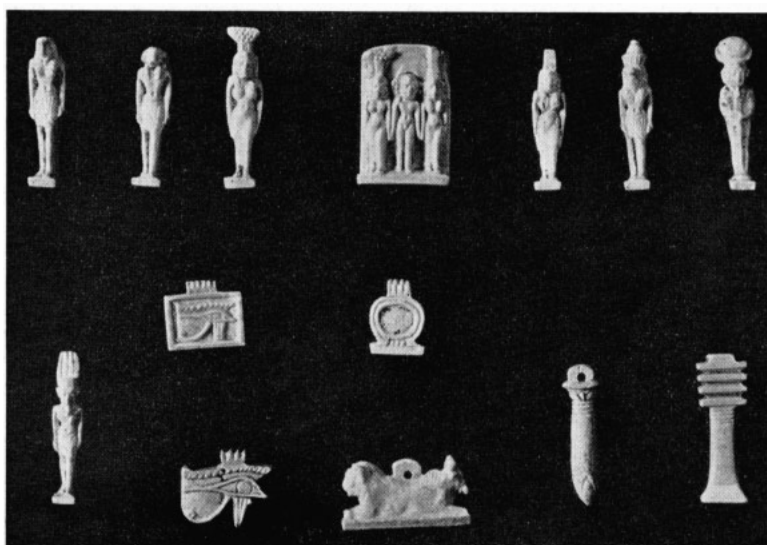
Above, left: Shu; right, Sow.

Below, left: Thoeris; right, Ptah-Seker.

literacy it is difficult to appreciate the magic potency of the written word to a people largely illiterate and in a primitive state of civilization.

I have not as yet spoken of religion because I wished to emphasize the part played by the material equipment necessary to an Egyptian tomb. The subject of Egyptian religion is extraordinarily complex and any attempt to go deeply into it here is impossible. It will be sufficient if we bear in mind that a multiplicity of gods major and minor influenced the dead; gods whose favor and protection had to be assured, and evil spirits whose attentions must be warded off. Primitive man sees

about him influences good and bad; he is lucky today, tomorrow everything goes wrong. Gods and demons are responsible; at one time he succeeds because he is under the influence of a beneficent being or has done something pleasing to a god, at another the god is angry or an evil spirit has attained power over him. If he can learn to propitiate the beneficent spirits and to render the evil ones impotent his future welfare can be assured, and the obvious method is magic — magic acts and magic words. Such magico-religious protection must have been practiced from the earliest times, but we first see it clearly in what are known as the

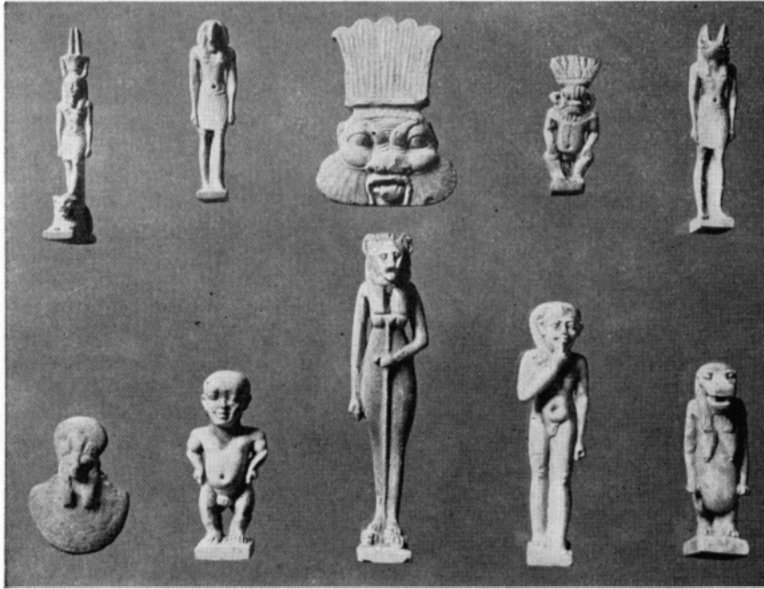
Fig. 3. *Selection from a Set of Amulets*

Faience

Above: Thoth; Khnum; Nephthys; Triad of Nephthys, Horus, and Isis; Isis; Horus; Ptah.

Center: "Sacred Eye"; Seal.

Below: Amon; "Sacred Eye"; Lion and Bull; Papyrus Column; "Ded" Column.

Fig. 4. *Deities**Faience*

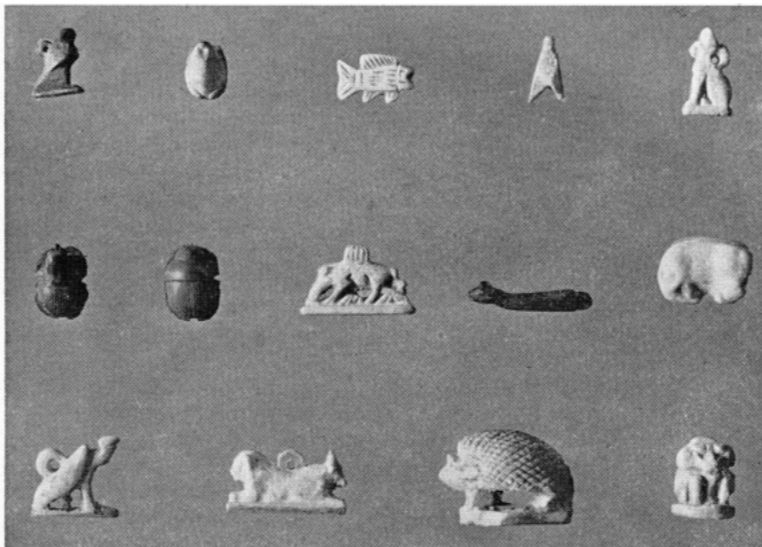
Above: Nefertum; Thoth; Head of Bes; Bes; Anubis.

Below: Aegis of Bast; Ptah-Seker; Sekhmet; Harpocrates; Theris.

Pyramid Texts, a series of charms and incantations inscribed on the walls of the tombs of kings toward the end of the Pyramid Age. These texts bear every evidence of extreme antiquity and reveal a richness of mythological allusion and a complexity of magic practice which render them in part quite unintelligible to us. They represent beliefs and practices handed down, originally by word of

mouth, through countless generations. Their importance for the discussion in hand, however, is simply this: that in his efforts to assure the future life of the dead the Egyptian was not content with material things alone but turned every means at his disposal to the common end, including the resources of religion and magic.

A review of the funerary practices of the

Fig. 5. *Animals**Various Materials*

Above: Hawk (lapis lazuli); Frog (grey stone); Fish (steatite); Fly (faience); Cat (faience).

Centre: Hawk-headed Scarab (lapis lazuli); Scarab Beetle (green jasper); Sow (faience);

Snake's Head (carnelian); Hippopotamus (faience).

Below: Vulture (limestone); Lion and Bull (faience); Hedgehog (faience); Ape (faience).

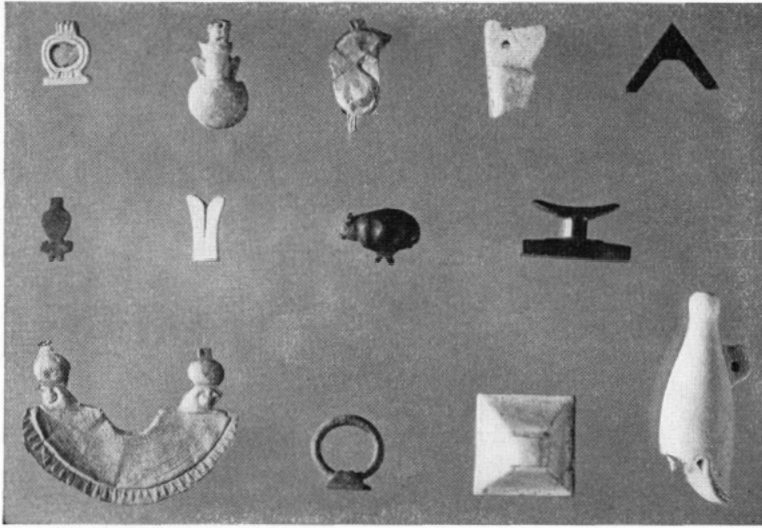


Fig. 6. Models of Objects

Various Materials

Above: Seal (faience); Vase (faience); Royal Headdress (gold sheet); Red Crown (faience); Mason's Level (haematite).

Centre: Seal (stone); "Peseshkef Wand" (limestone); Sacrificial Ox (red jasper); Headrest (haematite).

Below: Bead Collar (gold sheet); Seal Ring (stone); Seal (faience); White Crown (faience).

Pyramid Age, the high-water mark of Egyptian civilization, is necessary to an understanding of the later practices with which we are more especially concerned. We have seen how the supplying of material wants was provided for by material objects and by magic facsimiles in the form of pictures and

writing, and how these material provisions were supplemented by magico-religious protection as exemplified in the Pyramid Texts. From the close of the Pyramid Age to the Saite-Ptolemaic Period was two thousand years or more, during which many influences were brought to bear on the

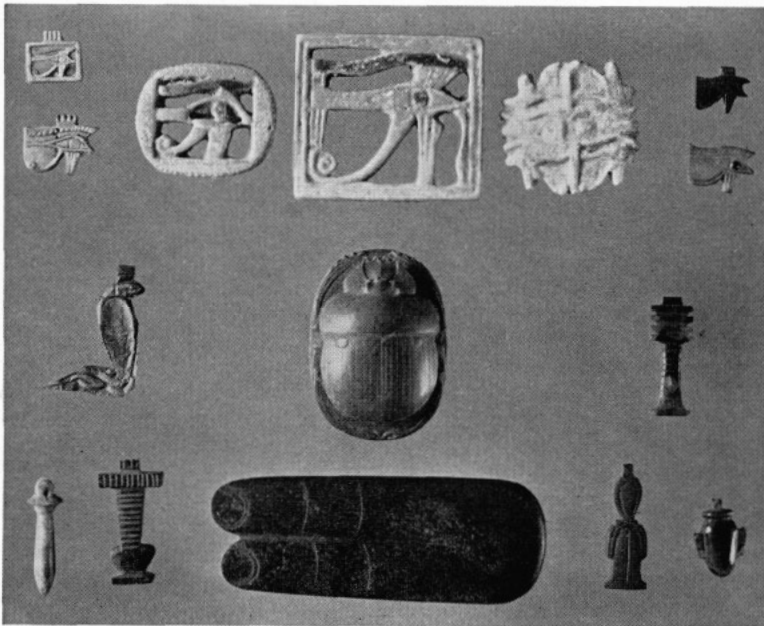


Fig. 7. Signs and Symbols

Various Materials

Above: "Sacred Eye" amulets (faience, except upper right, which is carnelian).

Centre: Uraeus (gold sheet); Heart Scarab (serpentine); "Ded" Column (carnelian).

Below: Papyrus Column (beryl); "Sma" sign (black stone); Two Fingers (black stone); "Buckle" amulet (red jasper); Heart (carnelian).

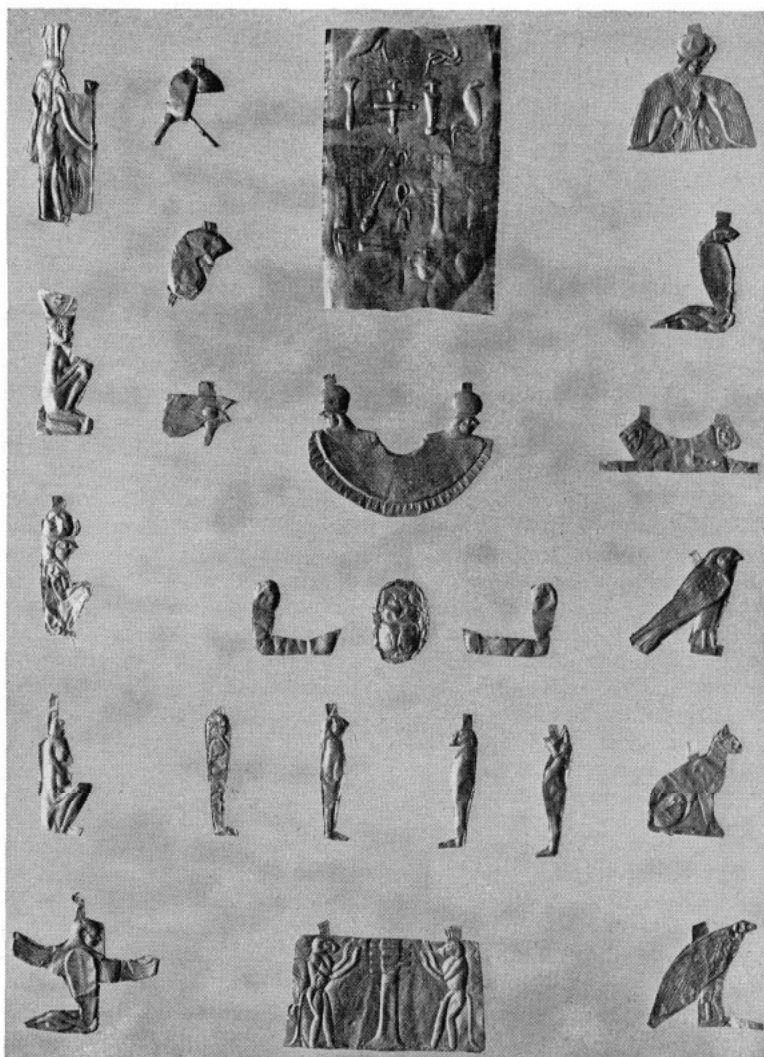


Fig. 8. Amulets cut from Impressed Sheet Gold

people and on their beliefs and funerary practices. Of these influences two appear to be of primary importance, one economic, the other religious, and these two influences go far to explain the growth in the part played by amulets in the funerary practices of the Egyptians.

The placing of objects of practical use in the tombs was a very serious drain on the resources of the people. In times of great prosperity such as the Pyramid Age it was possible to do this, but when stability assured by a strong central government gave place to disorder, rebellion, and poverty, it was a practice which could not be maintained. In the period of disruption and internecine strife which intervened between the Old and Middle Kingdoms we are struck by the poverty of funerary equipment. Tomb furniture is reduced to a minimum and cheap imitations in miniature take the place of the practical articles which were too valuable to be withdrawn from daily use. The lesson

taught by these five hundred years of poverty is revealed when in the Middle Kingdom a certain degree of prosperity returned to the people under a quasi-feudal system. Models and miniature scenes from daily life replace in part their larger and more costly originals. The coffins too are no longer plain receptacles for the mummy but have their inner faces inscribed with magic texts, the lineal descendants of the Pyramid Texts found in the tombs of earlier kings. In other words, imitations of real objects are thought adequate to supply the needs of the dead, and a greater reliance is placed on the magic powers of the written charms and incantations embodied in the Coffin Texts.

With the New Kingdom and Empire, marked by fabulous wealth acquired through foreign conquest and loot, the burial places of the great are once more filled with countless articles of furniture, but these are more and more frequently cheap and showy facsimiles and are marked by a growing

emphasis on ritualistic as distinguished from real utility. The old naïve materialism and essentially simple faith in the efficacy of practical objects is giving way to a sophisticated and decadent ritualism, to a growing reliance on symbolism and magic. This tendency is reflected in the history of the country at this period, in the ever growing power of the priesthood, due in part to the wealth of the great temples which received greater and greater support from the state, in part to the gullibility of the common people, whose illiterate awe of the learned priestly class rendered them an easy prey to the cupidity of the priests and ready recipients of the complex ritualism by which the latter sought to bind them ever more closely to the service of the temples. Akhenaton feared this tendency and fought against it, and for the short years of his reign succeeded in pushing it into the background, but the vested interest of state religion had entrenched itself too firmly in the superstitions of the people. Its power and wealth grew during the years of foreign conquest until civil and religious dominion merged in the priest-kings of the Twenty-first Dynasty. The years from the Twenty-first to the Twenty-sixth Dynasty are marked by a series of foreign dominations, Libyan and Ethiopian, and by the vain struggle against the advancing menace of Assyrian dominion; in other words, a period of poverty and insecurity. Reënforced by the pressure of economic necessity, the influences of superstition and the fetishism of a complex and highly formal ecclesiastical system bore fruit in still further changes in funerary practice. Attention was withdrawn from the material furnishings of the tomb, from food, drink, and utilitarian equipment, and was focussed on the mummy, its guiding along the paths of the underworld by the texts of the Book of the Dead and other magic writings, and its protection from every imaginable misfortune by a host of charms and talismans, amulets especially made for the purpose. Such are the amulets of the Saite-Ptolemaic Period and such very briefly is the evolution in Egyptian belief and custom which brought them into being.

When we consider the long process of evolution out of which the amulets of the Late Period developed, and when we realize the multiplicity of gods and the variety of beliefs in different parts of the country and at different periods of its history, it is not surprising that we find great difficulty in defining the meaning and the particular potency of any single amulet. Many of them go back thousands of years to the dawn of Egyptian civilization, and their original meaning is lost in the mists of time. Some we know to have been originally connected with primitive animal worship and later to have become associated with the particular god to whom that animal became sacred (Figs. 4, 5). Others take the form of natural objects and are to be thought of as representing those things buried with the dead in earlier times for practical purposes (Fig. 6), while still others are in the form

of hieroglyphic signs and would seem to be intended to ensure to the dead the qualities inherent in the ideas for which those signs stand (Fig. 7). The Book of the Dead refers to the meaning of some amulets, but often in such a vague way as to leave us little the wiser. We must remember that these objects were endowed with magic powers and that where magic is concerned mystery and obscurity of meaning only add to the occult efficacy desired. Although ritual-loving priestly commentators on the sacred writings may offer explanations which we cannot but suspect of being intended further to mystify rather than to explain, there is little doubt that those who used these amulets for the protection of their dead were quite content in the belief that they were powerful magic without seeking to know just how they worked or what specific meaning was attached to each.

The materials out of which amulets were made are many. Perhaps the commonest of all is faience, a paste made of ground stone mixed with some adhesive binder. This paste was shaped usually in a mould, sometimes by hand, and then covered with a glaze of blue or green color, the whole being baked to give it a permanent vitreous surface. All the examples in Figs. 1, 2, 3, and 4 are of this material. Fig. 2 illustrates the great range in quality of workmanship shown by these objects, all the way from the finely modelled hand-finished specimen (No. 4, below) to the crudely moulded approximation of the same figure (No. 6, below), which it would be difficult to recognize were it not for the intermediate grade which connects the two extremes. Fig. 1 shows two views of perhaps the finest faience amulet in the Museum's collection, a figure of the Memphite god Nefertum standing on the back of a recumbent lion, and Fig. 3 shows part of a fine set of diminutive size in the same material.

Amulets were also made of different kinds of stone, among which, to name only a few, may be mentioned lapis lazuli, carnelian, red or green jasper, haematite, teatite, beryl, serpentine, and limestone. Some of these stones are extremely hard and we cannot but admire the technical skill which could fashion these delicate objects out of such obdurate materials (Figs. 5 to 7).

Another favorite substance for the manufacture of amulets was gold. Always a popular material with the Egyptians not only for its intrinsic value and brilliance but also because of its permanence, gold lent itself readily to the cheap and rapid fabrication of amulets of many kinds. Fig. 8 reproduces a selection of specimens from a set in the Museum's collection, and with them part of a sheet of unfinished figures to show the method of manufacture. The required figures and signs were cut in intaglio in a stone or pottery mould into which a sheet of gold was beaten until it took on the impress of the figures. It was then only necessary to cut the different units from the sheet and the waste could be melted down and used in making a second batch.

The amulets illustrated in the accompanying figures are but a small selection from the extensive group which has come to the Museum from its excavations at Giza, and which is on exhibition in the Seventh Egyptian Gallery. As illustrations of Egyptian magico-religious belief no less than as examples of their technical skill and artistic ability in little things, these objects cannot fail to be of interest.

Following is a list of the amulets illustrated in Figs. 1 to 7, with such identifications as are possible:

Figure 1.

Nefertum. Standing upon a recumbent lion; the son of Ptah and Sekhmet and member with them of the Memphite Triad.

Figure 2.

Shu. One of the primeval gods, who upholds the heavens.
Sow. Sacred to Osiris, god of the dead.
Thoeris. The hippopotamus goddess, wife of Bes, protectress against evil and patroness of childbirth.
Ptah-Seker. Bandy-legged child with large head. A god of the dead.

Figure 3.

Thoth. The ibis-headed god of the moon, patron of learning and judge of the dead.
Khnum. The ram-headed god of Elephantine.
Nephtys. Sister of Isis.
Triad. Nephtys and Isis with the child Horus between them.
Isis. Wife of Osiris and mother of Horus.
Horus. The sun god with hawk's head and double crown: the divine king.
Ptah. The artificer and great god of Memphis.
"Sacred Eye." The so-called eye of Horus or Ra, one of the commonest of Egyptian amulets at all periods. Meaning uncertain.
Seal. With which the owner's name is stamped on property and documents. As an amulet probably symbolizes the name or individuality and perhaps the idea of ownership of property.
Amon. The great god of Thebes.
Lion and Bull. Amulet representing the fore parts of a lion and a bull joined together. Of unclear meaning.
Papyrus Column. A hieroglyphic sign with the meaning "green," "prosperous," "refreshed;" hence as an amulet conferring these qualities.
"Ded" Column. Special symbol of Osiris. As a hieroglyphic sign means "stable," "enduring."

Figure 4.

Nefertum. See Fig. 1, above.
Thoth. See Fig. 3, above.
Head of Bes. See Bes, below.
Bes. The dwarf god with feather headdress. Husband of Thoeris; protector against evil and patron of the nursery and toilet.
Anubis. The jackal-headed god of embalming; protector of the dead.
Aegis of Bast. Broad collar surmounted by a cat's head. Emblem of the cat-headed goddess Bast of Bubastis.
Ptah-Seker. See Fig. 2, above.
Sekhmet. The lioness-headed goddess of war, trampling on two captives.
Harpocrates. The child Horus with side-lock of youth and finger on lips.
Thoeris. See Fig. 2, above.

Figure 5.

Hawk. Emblem of Horus and Ra.
Frog. Emblem of Heqet, goddess of birth.
Fish. Meaning uncertain.
Fly. Meaning doubtful.
Cat. Emblem of the goddess Bast.

Hawk-Headed Scarab Beetle. Emblem of the sun god. As a hieroglyph means "to become," "exist," hence a symbol of existence and life.

Scarab Beetle. The same.

Sow. See Fig. 2, above.

Snake's Head. A charm against snakes.

Hippopotamus. Emblem of Thoeris. See Fig. 2, above.

Vulture. Emblem of the goddess Mut.

Lion and Bull. See Fig. 3, above.

Hedgehog. Meaning uncertain.

Ape. Sacred to Thoth. See Fig. 3, above.

Figure 6.

Seal. See Fig. 3, above.

Vase. A symbol of drink offerings. Replaces the real vessels of wine and beer deposited in the earlier tombs.

Royal Headdress. Emblem of royalty; the dead man is merged with Osiris, king of the dead.

Red Crown. Emblem of power over Lower Egypt; another symbol of royalty.

Mason's Level. Originally a builder's tool. Its symbolism is not clear, perhaps "rectitude?"

Seal. Another form of seal. See Fig. 3, above.

"Peseshkef" Wand. Model of the magic implement used in the ceremony of "opening the mouth."

Sacrificial Ox. Ox bound for sacrifice; representing food offerings (Cf. scenes of butchery on the walls of mastaba tombs).

Headrest. Originally an article of household furniture, has come to be a protective charm.

Bead Collar. Model of an article of personal adornment.

Seal Ring. Similar to the seal. See Fig. 3, above.

Seal. See Fig. 3, above.

White Crown. Emblem of power over Upper Egypt; another symbol of royalty.

Figure 7.

"Sacred Eyes." A number of variations of this popular amulet. See Fig. 3, above.

Uraeus. Coiled cobra, symbol of royalty and divinity; hence applicable to the dead as identified with Osiris.

Heart Scarab. Placed on the mummy to represent the heart, and often inscribed with charms to ensure its justification on the day of judgment.

"Ded" Column. See Fig. 3, above.

Papyrus Column. See Fig. 3, above.

"Sma" Sign. A hieroglyph meaning "unite," "join together."

Two Fingers. Meaning uncertain.

"Buckle" Amulet. Ensures the protection of Isis.

Heart. Meaning not clear; perhaps similar to that of the heart scarab.

D. D.

The Art of Spinning and Weaving

THE Museum has recently added three films illustrating the technique of various arts to the group of four made last season. Two of these, *The Silversmith* and *The Last of the Wood Engravers*, were introduced to the public on October 27. The third, *The Art of Spinning and Weaving*, will have its première on December 9. With this film will be shown for the first time a similar picture, *The Medal Maker*, produced by the University Film Foundation for the American Numismatic Society. Laura Gardin Fraser interprets the technique of the medalist.

The seventeenth century rooms in the Museum have been utilized as a background in *The Art of Spinning and Weaving*. Spinning wheels, looms, and other devices for early weaving were installed in the rooms, and the Dedham Weavers, dressed in Colonial costumes, reproduced faithfully the