

# Symbols

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## Adoration (dua) - "Adore"

### Adoration

#### (dua)

*Appearance:* The figure shown with outstretched and upraised arms represents the pose of worship and adoration adopted by the ancient Egyptians. The gesture was made before all images of the gods as well as by people approaching the king.



In painted scenes, figures are shown in exactly the same manner as in the hieroglyph with apparently one arm held further forward than the other. However, in statues it can be seen that the correct pose is to hold both arms the same distance from the body.

*Meaning:* The *dua* hieroglyph portrayed the concept of praise, worship, adoration and respect.



## Akh (akh) - "Effectiveness"

### Akh

#### (akh)

**Appearance:** The *akh* was depicted as a crested ibis. However, there is probably only a phonetic relationship between the bird and the concept.

**Meaning:** In the world of the living, the *akh* most commonly referred to the "effectiveness" of kings or officials, who operated on behalf of their gods or

kings (respectively). Anyone though could be *akh*-effective or do *akhu*-effective deeds. These deeds did not need to be glorious or useful, but simply concrete acts that affected eternity and helped maintain ma'at. For example, when Pharaoh Senwosret I in his role as Horus, the son of Osiris, he built monuments to his divine father and made offerings. He wrote that he was "doing that which is *akh*-effective." Oudjahorresne performed *akhu*-acts for his townspeople by defending the weak, saving the troubled and protecting them as he would protect his children.

In the realm of the Afterworld, *akh* was the deceased who became an effective being by being supplied with all of the necessary offerings and who knew the necessary spells. One became an *akh* through a ritual appropriately titled, "Cause One to Become an *Akh*." This ritual was performed by a priest called the "*akh*-seeker" (skhen-akh). Those deceased who have become *akhu* can still act for or against the living, and exist with them in a reciprocal relationship. If the living care and maintain the deceased, the deceased can care and protect the living.



## Ankh (ankh) - "Life"

### **Ankh**

#### **(ankh)**

**Appearance:** The *ankh* is one of the most familiar of Egyptian hieroglyphs. It resembles the Christian cross, with a loop above the transverse bar. Theories on its origins are numerous and varied; ranging from sexual symbolism to the common sandal strap. Like the Knot of Isis, which it resembles, it is most likely depicts some kind of elaborate bow. Detailed representations of the *ankh* show that the lower section is actually comprised of two parts - the ends of the bow. Early examples of the *ankh* actually show the ends separated.

Originally, the *ankh* may have been a knot with some specific religious or mythical significance.

**Meaning:** While the origins of the *ankh* may be obscure, the meaning is certainly clear - "life". It is with this basic connotation that the sign is carried in the hands of many Egyptian deities.

The *ankh* may represent the life-giving elements of air and water. It was often

shown being offered to the king's lips as a symbol of the "breath of life." Anthropomorphic pictures of the *ankh* sometimes show it holding an ostrich-feather fan behind the pharaoh in a variant form of this idea. Similarly, chains of ankhs were shown poured out of water vessels over the king as a symbol of the regenerating power of water. Libation vessels which held the water used in religious ceremonies were themselves sometimes produced in the shape of the *ankh* hieroglyph.

The popularity of the *ankh* is evident in the numerous and varied types of everyday objects which were shaped in the form of the *ankh*. In Tutankhamun's tomb, a gilded mirror case was found in the shape of the *ankh* (see above left). The artist clearly was enjoying a play on words, as the Egyptian word for "mirror" was also, "ankh." Other objects such as spoons and sistrums were constructed in this familiar shape.

The *ankh* was popular throughout Egyptian history and due to its cruciform shape remained so into the Coptic period. It entered Christian iconography as the *crux ansata*, the handled or "eyed" cross.



## Ba (ba) - "Soul"

**Ba**

**(ba)**

**Appearance:** The ba was always portrayed as a human-headed bird, usually a human-headed falcon. The ba bird was often shown hovering over the deceased's mummy or leaving or entering the tomb at will.

**Meaning:** The word *ba* is usually translated as "soul" or "spirit". However, ba is probably better translated as "spiritual manifestation."

The ba is one of the specific components of the human being as understood in Egyptian thought. In the New Kingdom, the ba was a spiritual aspect of the human being which survived - or came into being - at death. It was endowed with the person's individuality and personality. The ba occasionally revisited the tomb of the deceased, for the dead body was its rightful home.



Animals were sometimes thought to be the *ba* (plural of *ba*) of deities. At Heliopolis, the bennu bird was called the "ba of Re." At Memphis the Apis bull was worshipped as the ba of Ptah or Osiris. At times, Osiris himself was called the "ba of Re".

The *ba* could also represent anonymous gods or powers. As such, they are occasionally represented in various mythological contexts. They are shown greeting the sun or traveling with it in its barque. In some illustrations of the Book of the Dead, *ba* birds are shown towing the barque of the sun during its nightly journey through the underworld. These *ba* birds may represent deities, whether or not they are shown with the curved beards of gods.



### Baboon (ian) - "Sun", "Moon"

#### **Baboon**

#### **(ian)**

**Appearance:** Only two species of primate were known in Egypt: the cercopith and the dog-faced baboon (*Papio hamadryas*). The latter was sacred in Egypt. Probably a native of Nubia, it was brought into Egypt in pre-dynastic times.

Baboons were very popular in Egypt, and sometimes kept as pets. Many tomb scenes show the animal led on a leash, or playing with the children of the household. It is believed that some baboons were trained by their owners to pick figs in the trees for them.

The baboon was also very admired in Egypt for its intelligence and also for its sexual lustfulness. Baboon feces was an ingredient in Egyptian aphrodisiac ointments.

**Meaning:** The baboon held several positions in Egyptian mythology. The name of the baboon god Baba, who was worshipped in Pre-Dynastic times, may be

the origin of the animal's name.

By the time of the Old Kingdom, the baboon was closely associated with the god of wisdom, science and measurement, Thoth. As Thoth's sacred animal, the baboon was often shown directing scribes in their task. As Thoth was a god of the moon, his baboons were often shown wearing the crescent moon on their head (as shown in the statue above). Baboons carried out Thoth's duties as the god of measurement when they were portrayed at the spout of water clocks, and on the scales which weighed the heart of the deceased in the judgement of the dead.

The baboon had several other funerary roles. Baboons were said to guard the first gate of the underworld in the *Book of That Which is in the Underworld*. In Chapter 155 of the *Book of the Dead*, four baboons were described as sitting at the corners of a pool of fire in the Afterlife. One of the Four Sons of Horus, Hapy, had the head of a baboon and protected the lungs of the deceased.

As mentioned earlier, the baboon was associated with the moon due to his connection with Thoth. However, the baboon was more often considered a solar animal by the ancient Egyptians. This may be due to the animal's habit of screeching at daybreak or because of their practice of warming themselves in the early morning sun. The ancient Egyptians believed these were signs that the baboon worshipped the sun. Baboons were often portrayed in art with their arms raised in worship of the sun. They were also shown holding the *Udjat*, a solar symbol or shown riding in the day boat of the sun-god Re.



[Basket \(nebet\) - "All", "Lord"](#)

## **Basket**

### **(nebet)**

**Appearance:** The hieroglyph for the basket was a symbol outline of a bowl, which approximated the appearance of Egyptian wicker baskets. The hieroglyph was often painted yellow or green to match the color of the plants used to make the baskets. Egyptian baskets were made from plants, such as rushes, palm leaves and grasses. More detailed images of the symbol showed horizontal lines or a checkerboard pattern to give the appearance of basket weaving.

**Meaning:** The *nebet* hieroglyph portrayed the concept of two words that sounded identical. *Neb*, "all" and *neb*, "lord" or "master". The glyph was used interchangeably to represent these concepts.

On the chest from Tutankhamun's tomb, seen above, the baskets' are repeatedly representing "all". They are a wish for the king to enjoy "all life and dominion." The basket, was used in many amulets in this type of imagery.

The basket could also represent, "lord". Deities were often shown sitting or standing upon the glyph to emphasize their divine nature. The vulture and the cobra (see glyph) were often placed atop the basket to identify them as the symbols of Upper and Lower Egypt, and not just ordinary animals. In the pharaoh's *nebtj* (Two Ladies) title, the goddesses Nekhebet and Buto were seated on baskets.



[Bow \(iunet, pedjet\) - "Enemies"](#)

**Bow**

**(iunet, pedjat)**

**Appearance:** Iconoclastically, the bow was typically shown horizontally with the bow string bound to the mid-section of the bow staff to avoid its warping under the string's constant pull when not in use. The bow was the most powerful and effective weapon in the ancient world.

**Meaning:** From early times the bow was a symbol and attribute of the warrior goddess Neith and she was often portrayed holding the weapon.

The bow could also represent whole nations. The enemies of Egypt were frequently referred to as "The Nine Bows". They were sometimes depicted as actual bows or personified as ethnically differentiated captives. On Tutankhamen's sandals, the hieroglyphic sign of the bow is repeated on the soles, thereby allowing the king to symbolically step on and subjugate his enemies.

The bow was also depicted held by various gods or kings who hold the weapon backwards with the string turned toward captives in a gesture of dominance. In some scenes surrendering enemies are shown holding their bows over their heads in this manner, perhaps symbolically beneath the dominance of the

victorious Egyptian Pharaoh.



## Brazier (khet) - "Fire"

### **Brazier**

#### **(khet)**

**Appearance:** A brazier was a four-lobed portable ritual grill used in funerary offerings. The grill was lifted by the lobes and thus the user was able to move it without being burned. The hieroglyph depicts the brazier with its lobes and a stylized flame. The lobe in the rear is hidden by the flame.

**Meaning:** The brazier was the determinative in the Egyptian language for many words related to fire and heat, for example: "fire", "flame", "hot" and "candle". It was a symbol of fire in Egyptian art and of fire's connotations. Fire was a mysterious and potent entity in many ancient cultures. It is found depicted frequently in Egyptian art.

Fire seems to have a life force of its own and thus was a symbol itself for life. At the *sed* festival, which renewed and gave new life to his reign in Egypt, the pharaoh would light a symbolic fire. The sun was seen as the "fire of life". The *uraeus*, a symbol of the sun, was often portrayed spitting fire at the sun's enemies. Heliopolis, whose name literally means "city of the sun" was sometimes represented by a brazier. A pair of braziers represented the "Island of Fire" where the sun was born. This island was also a metaphor for the dawn.

Fire was also closely related to the Underworld. Much like the medieval Christian concept of Hell, the Egyptian Underworld was filled with fiery rivers and lakes. The Underworld was also inhabited by many fire demons who threatened the wicked dead. These demons were depicted with the hieroglyph of the brazier on their heads. The Lakes of Fire in the Underworld were drawn like normal pools of water, but with braziers on each side and fiery red (instead of blue) wavy lines transversing them. The Lakes of Fire were also shown with baboons seated at each corner. These lakes were only troublesome for the wicked, the righteous could drink of them and be refreshed. The righteous could also transform into shooting flames and destroy their enemies.

Fire was also a protective element to the Egyptians. Protective deities such as Tauret would sometimes wield torches and braziers to ward off evil.

A similar hieroglyph shows an incense bowl or lamp with a flame (). This glyph was used as a substitute for the brazier. It was also used as an amulet to protect the deceased.



## Cartouche (shenu) - "Sun", "Pharaoh"

### **Cartouche**

#### **(shenu)**

**Appearance:** The cartouche is an elongated version of the *shen* ring. The Egyptian name for the cartouche, *shenu*, is derived from the same verb, "sheni" (to encircle), as the *shen* ring. The modern name came from Napoleon's soldiers during his expedition to Egypt. The sign reminded them of the cartridges, "cartouches", used in their guns.

**Meaning:** The cartouche was the place holder for the name of the pharaoh. As it is descended from the *shen* ring, the earliest examples of the cartouche were in fact circular and identical to that sign. Soon though, the ring was lengthened to hold the larger number of hieroglyphs in the pharaoh's name. By the 5th dynasty, the pharaoh's two most important names (he had five or more), his nomen (birth-name) and prenomen (throne name) were enclosed in cartouches.

The cartouche had clear solar symbology. It originally represented everything that was encircled by the sun -- the king's realm.

However, the cartouche was also a protective symbol for the king. In the Eighteenth Dynasty, royal sarcophagi were constructed in the shape of the cartouche. The entire burial chamber of Thutmose III and the sarcophagus was in the this shape. It seems fitting that the king's final resting place would be representative of his name and person.

The cartouche was also used in many decorative ways. For instance the box shown to the left was found in King Tutankhamun's tomb. The symbols on the lid are in fact his name. Finger rings were also made in the shape of the cartouche.

Finally, partially personified cartouches were found on many palace walls. Inside the ring would be the name of cities and subject peoples the king

dominated during his reign.



## Cobra (iaret)

### **Cobra**

#### **(iaret)**

**Appearance:** The cobra was almost always portrayed rearing up and with its hood dilated. The Greek word *uraeus* is typically used to describe the cobra in this pose. The word may have its origins from the Egyptian words which meant "she who rears up". The species of cobra represented as the uraeus is the *Naja haje*.

**Meaning:** According to the Story of Re, the first uraeus was created by the goddess Isis who formed it from the dust of the earth and the spittle of the sun-god. The uraeus was the instrument with which Isis gained the throne of Egypt for her husband Osiris.

The uraeus was a symbol for various things from early times including: the sun, Lower Egypt, the king and a number of deities.

As the sacred creature of the Delta city of Buto, the reptile was known by the same name. She soon became an emblem of all of Lower Egypt. The uraeus was often depicted with the vulture Nekhebet who served the same function for Upper Egypt. Together they symbolized the unification of the two lands. The creatures also appear together in the pharaoh's *nebtj* or "Two Ladies" name.

The cobra was also called the "fiery eye" of Re and two uraei were sometimes depicted on either side of the solar disk.

A gilded wooden cobra called *netjer-ankh* ("living god") was found in the tomb of Tutankhamon (see picture at left). It is representative of the cobra's associations with the afterlife. In funerary works, the cobra is often depicted spitting fire. Two cobras doing just that were said to guard the gates of every "hour" of the underworld. During the Late Period, uraei were also shown towing the barque of the sun in funerary papyri. In all of these examples, the cobra's protective nature is clearly demonstrated.

The cobra was also representative of various deities such as Neith, Ma'at, and

Re.

## Colors

### **Color**

#### **(iwen)**

In ancient Egypt, color was an integral part of the substance and being of everything in life. The color of something was a clue to the substance or heart of the matter. When it was said that one could not know the color of the gods, it meant that they themselves were unknowable, and could never be completely understood. In art, colors were clues to the nature of the beings depicted in the work. For instance, when Amon was portrayed with blue skin, it alluded to his cosmic aspect. Osiris' green skin was a reference to his power over vegetation and to his own resurrection.



Of course, not every use of color in Egyptian art was symbolic. When overlapping objects, such as when portraying a row of oxen, the colors of each animal is alternated so as to differentiate each individual beast. Apart from these practical considerations though, it is safe to say that the Egyptian use of color in their art was largely symbolic.

The Egyptian artist had at his disposal six colors, including black and white. These colors were generated largely from mineral compounds and thus retain their vibrancy over the millennia. Each of these colors had their own intrinsic symbolic meaning, as shown below. However, the ambivalence of meaning demonstrated by some should be carefully noted.

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**The color green** (*wadj*) was the color of vegetation and new life. To do "green things" was slang for beneficial, life-producing behavior. As mentioned above, Osiris was often portrayed with green skin and was also referred to as "the Great Green". Green malachite was a symbol of joy and the land of the blessed dead was described as the "field of malachite." In Chapter 77 of the Book of the Dead, it is said that the deceased will become a falcon "whose wings are of green stone". Highly impractical of course, it is obvious that the color of new life and re-birth is what is important. The Eye of Horus amulet was commonly made of green stone as well.

The pigment green could be produced from a paste manufactured by mixing oxides of copper and iron with silica and calcium. It could also be derived from malachite, a natural copper ore.

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**Red** (*desh*) was the color of life and of victory. During celebrations, ancient Egyptians would paint their bodies with red ochre and would wear amulets made of cornelian, a deep red stone. Seth, the god who stood at the prow of the sun's barque and slew the serpent Apep daily, had red eyes and hair.

Red was also a symbol of anger and fire. A person who acted "with a red heart" was filled with rage. "To redden" meant "to die". Seth while the god of victory over Apep, was also the evil murderer of his brother Osiris. His red coloration could take on the meaning of evil or victory depending on the context in which he is portrayed. Red was commonly used to symbolize the fiery nature of the radiant sun and serpent amulets representing the "Eye of Re" (the fiery, protective, and possibly malevolent aspect of the sun) were made of red stones.

The normal skin tone of Egyptian men was depicted as red, without any negative connotation.

Red paint was created by Egyptian artisans by using naturally oxidized iron and red ocher.

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The color white (*hedj* and *shesep*) suggested omnipotence and purity. Due to its lack of color white was also the color of simple and sacred things. The name of the holy city of Memphis meant "White Walls." White sandals were worn at holy ceremonies. The material most commonly used for ritual objects such as small ceremonial bowls and even the embalming table for the Apis Bulls in Memphis was white alabaster. White was also the heraldic color of Upper Egypt. The "Nefer", the crown of Upper Egypt was white, even though originally it was probably made of green reeds.

The pure white color used in Egyptian art was created from chalk and gypsum.

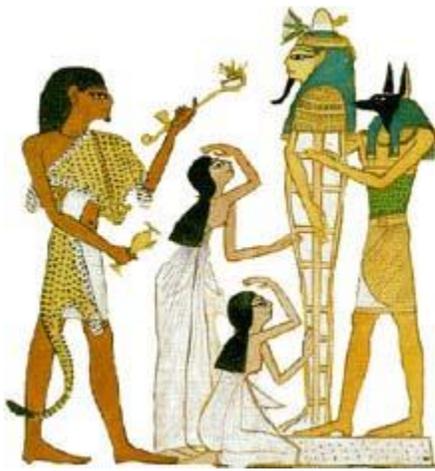
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In ancient Egypt, **black** (*kem*) was a symbol of death and of the night. Osiris, the king of the afterlife was called "the black one." One of the few real-life people to be deified, Queen Ahmose-Nefertari was the patroness of the necropolis. She was usually portrayed with black skin, although she was not a negro. Anubis, the god of embalming was shown as a black jackal or dog, even though real jackals and dogs are typically brown.

As black symbolized death it was also a natural symbol of the underworld and so also of resurrection. Unexpectedly perhaps, it could also be symbolic of fertility and even life! The association with life and fertility is likely due to the abundance provided by the dark, black silt of the annually flooding Nile. The color of the silt became emblematic of Egypt itself and the country was called "kemet" (the Black Land) by its people from early antiquity.

Black pigments were created from carbon compounds such as soot, ground charcoal or burnt animal bones.



The color **yellow** (*khenet, kenit*) was created by the Egyptian artisans using natural ochres or oxides. During the latter part of the new Kingdom, a new method was developed which derived the color using orpiment (arsenic trisulphide).

Both the sun and gold were yellow and shared the qualities of being imperishable, eternal and indestructible. Thus anything portrayed as yellow in Egyptian art generally carried this connotation. The skin and bones of the gods were believed to be made of gold. Thus statues of gods were often made of, or plated with gold. Also, mummy masks and cases of the pharaohs were often made of gold. When the pharaoh died he became the new Osiris and a god himself. In the image to the right of the Opening of the Mouth Ceremony, note the skin tones of the mummy and Anubis. Both are divine beings and both have golden skin. Compare this to the priest and the mourning women, who have the classic reddish-brown and pale pink skin tones of humans.

"White gold", an alloy of gold and silver (electrum), was seen as being the equivalent to gold and sometimes white was used in contexts where yellow would typically be used (and vice-versa).

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"**Egyptian blue**" (*irtiu, sbedj*) was made combining iron and copper oxides with silica and calcium. This produced a rich color however it was unstable and sometimes darkened or changed color over the years.

Blue was symbolic of the sky and of water. In a cosmic sense, this extended its symbolism to the heavens and of the primeval floods. In both of these cases, blue took on a meaning of life and re-birth.

Blue was naturally also a symbol of the Nile and its associated crops, offerings and fertility. The phoenix, which was a symbol of the primeval flood, was patterned on the heron. Herons naturally have a gray-blue plumage. However, they were usually portrayed with bright blue feathers to emphasize their association with the waters of the creation. Amon was often shown with a blue face to symbolize his role in the creation of the world. By extension, the pharaohs were sometimes shown with blue faces as well when they became identified with Amon. Baboons, which are not naturally blue, were portrayed as blue. It is not certain why. However, the ibis, a blue bird was a symbol of Thoth, just like the baboon was. It may be that the baboons were colored blue to emphasize their connection to Thoth.

The gods were said to have hair made of lapis lazuli, a blue stone. Note in the image above of the Opening of the Mouth ceremony that the mummy and Anubis both have blue hair.



## Djed Column (djed) - "Stability"

### **Djed Column**

#### **(djed)**

**Appearance:** The *djed* is an Egyptian symbol that is depicted as a column with a broad base and capital. At the top of the column the capital is divided by four parallel bars. The image has been interpreted in several ways. It is said to be:

- four pillars, seen one behind the other
- a man's, or Osiris' backbone
- a Syrian cedar with its branches removed
- the pole around which sheaves of grain were tied

**History:** Osiris was originally an agricultural deity from Syria. When his followers immigrated to Egypt, they brought with them their fetish (cult object). Their fetish was the *djed* and they named their city after it, "Djedu". As the popularity of Osiris grew, so did the *djed*'s appearance in art, especially in tombs. The *djed* was often painted on the bottom of coffins where the deceased's backbone would rest. The *djed* was also often created as an amulet of stability and regenerative power.

In Old Kingdom times, the *djed* was associated with the chief god of Memphis,

Ptah, who was called the "Noble Djed."

The Djed Pillar Festival was a cultic celebration of the symbol and its powers. It was held annually in Egypt and was a time of great spiritual refreshment for the people. The priests raised the djed pillar on the first day of shemu (the season of harvest on the Nile). The people then paid homage to the symbol and conducted a mock battle between good and evil. Oxen were driven around the walls of the capital, honoring the founding of the original capital, Memphis.

**Meaning:** The *djed* column was the Egyptian symbol of "stability". It was the symbol of the tree that grew around Osiris's casket and was used as a pillar in a Byblos palace. The djed was considered necessary to aid in the transformation of human flesh into the spiritual form assumed by the deceased in eternity.



## Ear (mesedjer) - "Hearing"

### **Ear**

#### **(mesedjer)**

**Appearance:** The human ear as seen in profile was often used symbolically in Egyptian art. Either the left or right ear was used; and unlike the Eye of Horus they both carried the same meaning.

**Meaning:** Symbolic ears are relatively common in Egyptian art, especially in a class of reliefs called "ear-stelae." These stelae were dedicated to certain gods in appreciation for answered prayers or for present requests.

The stelae typically featured images of the god and the supplicant worshipping him. Above this scene or to the side would be chiseled several human ears. These ears were believed to aid the gods in hearing the prayers. Several of the gods were described as "great of hearing" or "of hearing ears". Deities described this way include Ptah, Amon, Horus, Isis, and Thoth.

It was originally thought that these ear-stelae were requests for the healing of the deaf. However, comparable stelae featuring other body parts are not to be found and thus preclude such an interpretation.

Interestingly, the ear is rarely featured in Egyptian art outside of the context of the ear-stelae. Occasionally though, it was featured alone as an amulet.



## Eye of Horus (udjat, wadjet) - "Sun"

### Eye of Horus

#### (udjat, wadjet)

**Appearance:** The *udjat* is depicted as a human eye and eyebrow as they would be seen looking at a person full-faced. The eye is decorated with the markings that adorn the eyes of hawks.

Usually, it is the right eye shown as the *udjat*, although the left is not uncommon. This is probably because of another myth that says that the sun and the moon were the right (sun) and left (moon) eyes of the sky god and the sun is seen as more powerful.

As an amulet, it was often fashioned out of blue or green faience or from semi-precious stones.

**Meaning:** Also known as the Eye of Horus or the *udjat*, this eye is a symbol of the god Horus as both the son of Osiris and Isis and as the sun-god. Egyptian myths state that Horus lost his left eye in his war with Seth to avenge the death of his father. Seth tore the eye into pieces. The left eye, being the moon was discovered by Thoth (the god of wisdom and magic) lying in pieces, but he was able to reassemble them into the full moon. Each piece of the *udjat* (shown below) can be seen as representing a fraction of the descending geometric series  $\frac{1}{2}$ ,  $\frac{1}{4}$ ,  $\frac{1}{8}$ , etc., put together they make  $\frac{63}{64}$  or approximately 1. Having been reassembled, Thoth gave the Eye to Horus. Horus, in turn, gave the eye to his murdered father Osiris, thereby bringing him back to life.

The reverence shown to parents is one of the virtues symbolized by the *udjat*, and the amulet could be used as a substitute for any of the offerings an eldest son was supposed to provide daily at his father's tomb. It was believed to ward off sickness and capable of bringing the dead to life (as it did with Osiris). The eye was also placed in the wrappings of the mummies over the incision where the embalmers removed the internal organs. Damaging the body in any way was considered bad luck for the deceased, and the Egyptians hoped to protect it by placing the amulet over the cut.



## Feather (shut) - "Truth"

### the FEATHER

#### (shut)

**Appearance:** The feather is depicted as a tall ostrich plume whose tip bends over under its own weight.

**Meaning:** The feather, because of its name, "shut", was a symbol of Shu. Shu was the Egyptian god of the air and the father of the earth (Geb) and the sky (Nut). Shu was often shown wearing a feather in his hair. Occasionally Geb was shown dressed in feathers, a representation of the air which covers him.

Usually, the feather was a symbol of Ma'at, the goddess of truth and order. The goddess was always shown wearing an ostrich feather in her hair. The feather by itself was her emblem.

In art, the feather was shown in scenes of the Hall of Ma'at. This hall is where the deceased was judged for his worthiness to enter the afterlife. The seat of the deceased's soul, his heart, was weighed on a balance against the feather of Ma'at. If the heart was free from the impurities of sin, and therefore lighter than the feather, then the dead person could enter the eternal afterlife. Other gods in the judgement hall who were part of the tribunal overseeing the weighing of the heart were also pictured holding a feather.

During the feast of Min, men would erect a ceremonial pole. These men would wear four ostrich feathers on their head. The significance of the feather in this context is uncertain.



## Gold (nebu) - "Tomb"

### Gold

#### (nebu)

**Appearance:** The hieroglyph for gold represents a golden collar with beads on its lower edge and hanging ends.

**Meaning:** Gold was considered by the ancient Egyptians to be a divine and indestructible metal. It was associated with the brilliance of the sun. The sun

god Re was called "the mountain of gold" and during the Old Kingdom, the Pharaoh was called "the Golden Horus. The skin of the deities was believed to be golden.

The royal tomb was called the "House of Gold" during the New Kingdom and Isis and Nephthys were often depicted on the ends of sarcophagi kneeling on the hieroglyph meaning "gold".



Headrest (weres) - "Sun"

## Headrest

(weres)

**Appearance:** The headrest was used in ancient Egypt from the beginning of the Old Kingdom to support the head of a person while asleep. The headrest consisted of a curved upper section which cupped the head on top of a flattened base. Headrests were necessary in life and in death, the eternal sleep. As such, many headrests have been found inscribed with the owner's name and epithets such as "wekhem-ankh": "repeating life", a term equivalent to "deceased."

**Meaning:** Because of its supportive nature, the headrest was associated with the solar cult. It held the head, which like the sun, was lowered in the evening and rose again in the morning. A headrest from the tomb of Tutankhamun illustrates this imagery. On the base are the two lions of the horizon and the god of the air Shu upholds the cup for the head. A painting in the Book of the Dead owned by the scribe Ani portrays the solar barque on a stand. The shape of the stand and the bottom of the boat form the shape of hieroglyphic headrest.



Heart (ieb) - "Soul"

## Heart

(ieb)

**Appearance:** Those used to the valentine-related heart of Western Culture may be surprised at the Egyptian concept of the heart. Theirs looks more like a vase with handles, and indeed many vases and jars were shaped like the hieroglyph

in question. The heart of Egyptian iconography is a fairly faithful representation of a section of the heart of a sheep. The "handles" correspond with the connection of the veins and arteries to the organ.

**Meaning:** The Egyptians early in their history realized the connection of the heart to the pulse. An ancient Egyptian medical treatise of the heart says that it "speaks in the vessels of all the members." It is not surprising then that they believed that the heart held the mind and soul of the individual. Another Egyptian author stated emphatically that "the actions of the arms, the movement of the legs, the motion of every other member is done according to the orders of the heart that has conceived them." It was sometimes said of the dead that their hearts had "departed" because it was believed that the heart was the center a man's life force.

It was the heart which was weighed against the feather of truth in the hall of Ma'at during the diving judgement of the deceased. A heart unburdened with the weight of sin and corruption would balance with the feather and its possessor would enjoy the eternal afterlife.

The vital importance of the heart in determining the fate of the deceased in the afterlife lead to a chapter in the Book of the Dead (Spell 30) where the deceased implores his heart not to betray him. In part, it reads:

"O my heart which I had from my mother, O my heart which I had upon earth, do not rise up against me as a witness in the presence of the Lord of Things; do not speak against me concerning what I have done, do not bring up anything against me in the presence of the Great God, Lord of the West."

Many "heart" scarabs were manufactured in Egypt. These scarabs were designed to be placed over the heart of the deceased. On one side a carving of a scarab was featured. On the other side Spell 30 was inscribed.

During the embalming process, the Egyptians removed most of the internal organs from the body. However, they always left the heart inside the body. The brain was removed using a long bronze hook which was inserted up the nose. The Egyptians were not exactly sure what the brain did, although many believed that its job was to produce snot.

According to the priests of Memphis, the god Ptah conceived of all things in his heart and brought them into being by speaking their names.



## Ka (ka) - "Conscience"

**Ka**

**(ka)**

**Appearance:** In art the ka was portrayed in several ways: a person identical to the person whom it was associated with, as a shadowy figure, as a person with two upraised arms on his head. The hieroglyph for the ka was the shoulders and arms with the arms bent upwards at the elbow, similar to the "touchdown" gesture in American football.

**Meaning:** The "ka" is a very complex part of the symbolism in ancient Egyptian mythology and represents several things: the ka is a symbol of the reception of the life powers from each man from the gods, it is the source of these powers, and it is the spiritual double that resides with every man.

The ka as a spiritual double was born with every man and lived on after he died as long as it had a place to live. The ka lived within the body of the individual and therefore needed that body after death. This is why the Egyptians mummified their dead. If the body decomposed, their spiritual double would die and the deceased would lose their chance for eternal life. An Egyptian euphemism for death was "going to one's ka". After death the ka became supreme. Kings thus claimed to have multiple kas. Rameses II announced that he had over 20.

The ka was more than that though. When the ka acted, all was well, both spiritually and materially. Sin was called "an abomination of the ka". The ka could also be seen as the conscience or guide of each individual, urging kindness, quietude, honor and compassion. In images and statues of the ka, they are depicted as their owner in an idealized state of youth, vigor and beauty. The ka is the origin and giver of all the Egyptians saw as desirable, especially eternal life.

Kas resided in the gods as well. Egyptians often placated the kas of the deities in order to receive favors. The divine kas also served as guardians. Osiris was often called the ka of the pyramids.

The god Khnemu who was said to create each man out of clay on his potter's wheel also molded the ka at the same time.



## [Knife \(des\)](#)

### **Knife**

#### **(des)**

**Appearance:** The knife as portrayed in the hieroglyph above is clearly a simple flint blade (as shown below). The flint blade was produced in Egypt from prehistoric times. Flint was probably the first stone worked by human hands into tools. Even after metal knives became common in Egypt, the flint knife was still used in religious rituals, including during mummification.

**Meaning:** The knife was an obvious symbol of protection and retribution. Several protective deities, such as Bes and Tauret were often shown armed with knives. Guardians of the gates of the underworld, such as those shown at right were also shown bearing knives, notably of the flint type shown in the hieroglyph.



The knife was also an important part of solar and lunar symbology. The knife was a part of the "follower" glyph which was shown on board the solar boat of Re. Further, Re as a cat, slew the serpent Apep with a knife when he threatened the sacred Persea tree (a symbol of the sun itself). The crescent moon was imagined to be a knife in the hand of moon-gods such as Thoth and Khonsu. Thoth was said to destroy evildoers with the crescent moon as his weapon.

Due to the magic inherent in images of the knife, malevolent creatures such as scorpions and snakes were often depicted cut with knives to render them powerless.



## [Knot of Isis \(tiet\) - "Life"](#)

### **Knot of Isis**

#### **(tiet, tit, thet, tiyet)**

**Appearance:** The origin of the Isis knot is unknown but it may be a variation of the ankh, which it resembles except that its crossing arms curve downward.

The *tiet* was often shown with the *ankh* and *djed* signs as early as the Third Dynasty. The hieroglyph is usually translated to mean "life" or "welfare."

**Meaning:** It may be because it was so often paired with the *djed* pillar (a symbol of Osiris) that the *tiet* came to be associated with Isis. The *djed* and the *tiet* used together often alluded to the binary nature of life.

The *tiet* was often called the "knot of Isis" and the "blood of Isis." Complex myths surround these names, but it is uncertain whether they came about to explain the established epithets or if they truly relate the origin of the *tiet*. As it was called the "blood of Isis", amulets of the sign were often fashioned from red stones such as carnelion and jasper, or from red glass.



### Lapwing (rekhyt) - "Peoples"

#### **Lapwing**

#### **(rekhyt)**

**Appearance:** The lapwing (*Vanellus vanellus*) is a species of plover from Europe that migrates to northern Africa during the winter. It is quite common in the Nile Delta. It is easily recognized by its upturned crest, long legs and short hooked beak. In Egyptian art it was commonly depicted with its wings pinioned so that it can not fly.

**Meaning:** Early in Egypt's history, the lapwing was a symbol of the people of Egypt under the king's rule. On the Scorpion Macehead (c. 3000 BC), the lapwing is a symbol of the rule of the Upper Egyptian king over the Lower Egyptian people. The bird was an obvious choice to represent the Lower Egyptian people due to its habit of wintering in the Delta. On a 3<sup>rd</sup> Dynasty statue of King Djoser, he is shown standing on the Nine Bows (the enemies of Egypt), and also on several lapwings. These lapwings are shown with their wings twisted so that they are helpless and unable to fly.

In New Kingdom times, the bird's image was more positive. The image of the pinioned birds was transferred to the enemies of Egypt. However, it was still commonly a symbol of the people of Egypt. From the 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty forward, the lapwing was often portrayed with human arms in the act of giving praise. The bird was often shown in this pose on a basket with a star. This image is a rebus of the statement, "All the people give praise."



## Lotus (seshen) - "Lower Egypt"

### **Lotus**

#### **(seshen)**

**Appearance:** In Egypt, two native species of lotus grew, the white lotus (*Nymphaea lotus*) and the blue lotus (*Nymphaea caerulea*). A third type, the pink lotus (*Nelumbo nucifera*) was introduced to the country from Persia during the Late period. All three species were depicted in Egyptian art (the pink lotus showed up in Hellenistic artworks), however the sacred blue lotus was the flower most commonly used and the one depicted in the hieroglyph.

**Meaning:** The lotus closes at night and sinks underwater. In the morning it re-emerges and blooms again. Thus the flower became a natural symbol of the sun and creation. In Hermopolis, it was believed that it was a giant lotus blossom that first emerged from the primordial waters of Nun and from which the sun-god came forth (portrayed in the image at left).

As a symbol of re-birth, the lotus was closely related to the imagery of the funerary and Osirian cult. The Four Sons of Horus were frequently shown standing on a lotus in front of Osiris. The Book of the Dead contains spells for "transforming oneself into a lotus" and thus fulfilling the promise of resurrection.

The lotus was commonly used in art as a symbol of Upper Egypt. It was often shown with its long stems intertwined with papyrus reeds (a symbol of Lower Egypt) as a representation of the unification of the two lands.



## Menet Necklace (menet)

### **Menet Necklace**

#### **(menet, menat, menit)**

**Appearance:** The menet necklace was a wide beaded collar with a heavy counterweight (or "counterpoise") in the back to help keep it in place. The type of necklace depicted in the hieroglyph does not appear to have been common

until the New Kingdom.

The necklace, like the sistrum may have functioned as a percussion instrument in religious functions.

**Meaning:** Symbolically, the necklace was associated with the goddess Hathor, and her son Ihy. As an important attribute of "the Great Menet" (as Hathor was sometimes called), it may have functioned as a medium through which she transmitted her power. In many images of the goddess, she is shown offering the necklace to the king. The queen was often a high priestess of Hathor and thus is often shown herself offering the necklace. On the shrine of Tutankhamon, his wife Ankhesenamon was depicted offering the pharaoh a menet necklace constructed as a personification of Hathor. In images such as these, the menet appears to have been associated with such concepts of life, potency, fertility, birth and renewal.

In *the Adventures of Sinuhe*, the title character returns to Egypt after many years of living in the barbarous lands of Asia. Upon his reception in the court of the pharaoh, priestesses ritually offered him the menet and the sistrum so that he could be reborn into Egyptian culture and life.

When included as decoration or as an amulet in mortuary settings, the menet was associated again with Hathor, but in her duty as the goddess of the western necropolis and her part in the rebirth of the dead.

In many representations of Hathor as the divine cow she is shown wearing the menet necklace. In later periods, other goddesses in cow form (such as Nut or Isis) were shown wearing Hathor's menet.



## Mountain (djew)

### **Mountain**

#### **(djew)**

**Appearance:** The hieroglyphic sign for "mountain" depicted two peaks with a valley running between them. This image approximated the hills that rose up on either side of the Nile valley.

**Meaning:** Although the *djew* hieroglyph did portray the mountain ranges the Egyptians saw in their everyday lives, it also was a visualization of their cosmic

beliefs. Symbolically, the "mountain" was an image of the universal mountain whose two peaks were imagined to hold up the sky. The eastern peak was called *Bakhu*, to the west was *Manu*. The ends of this great mountain were guarded by two lions who were called Aker. Aker was a protector of the sun as it rose and set each day.

The Egyptian necropolis was typically located in the mountainous desert and so the *djew* was also closely associated with the concepts of the tomb and of the afterlife. The god of mummification, Anubis bore the epithet, "He who is upon his mountain." Hathor, the "Mistress of the Necropolis", while in the form of a cow, was often shown emerging from the side of the western mountain.

In painted scenes, the concept of a "hill" or "heap" of such things as grain are often expressed representationally with the *djew* sign. The use of the hieroglyphic shape is an effective tool to convey not only the shape but the size of such large heaps of grain.

A variation of the hieroglyph showing a range of three peaks was used to portray the concept of "foreign land."



## Nefer (nefer) - "Beauty"

### **Nefer**

#### **(nefer)**

**Appearance:** The origin of the hieroglyph is complex. It's appearance is sometimes described as a stylized stomach and windpipe. However, the hieroglyph is actually the heart and trachea. It originally may have been the esophagus and heart. The striations of the windpipe only appear in the hieroglyph following the Old Kingdom. The lower part of the sign has always clearly been the heart, for the markings clearly follow the form of a sheep's heart.

**Meaning:** The term *nefer* was very popular throughout the ages with the ancient Egyptians. It appears with a dozen different meanings in their literature... all positive. It was also incorporated into many personal names, including those of the famous queens Nefertiti and Nefertari.

The nefer hieroglyph was used to convey the concepts of "goodness" and "beauty". This is poignantly illustrated in the statue to the right of Merytamun,

the daughter of Rameses II. Her necklace is nothing but rows and rows of the 'nefer' hieroglyph. It also could carry the meaning of happiness, good fortune, youth and other related ideas. The sign was used in amulets and other decorative jewelry. Vases were also sometimes produced in the shape of the hieroglyph.

The White Crown of Upper Egypt was sometimes called "the Nefer" or "the White Nefer."



## Palace Wall (serekh) - "King's Home"

### **Palace Wall**

#### **(serekh)**

**Appearance:** The *serekh* glyph was one of the devices in which the name of the king was written. Another device was the more familiar *cartouche*. It was formed by a rectangular "frame" with a section below representing a type of niched or paneled walling which was common in early Egyptian architecture. The symbol was also a popular motif on early royal coffins. Above the frame, the Horus falcon was usually perched, and within the frame would be the king's name. The falcon emphasized kingship.

**Meaning:** The sides and "frame" of the *serekh* probably represent walls as seen in a plan, while the entire symbol represented the walls of the royal palace or the city in which the king lived as the incarnation of Horus.

The use of the *serekh* in Egyptian art and decoration dates to its earliest history. A memorial stela for the First Dynasty king, Djet, features the *serekh* as the sole decoration. The alabaster statue of the Sixth Dynasty king, Pepy I, shows a sophisticated use of the symbol. Here, the Horus falcon guards the king in the same manner as the famous statue of King Khephren. However, instead of facing the king and wrapping his wings around the king's head, the falcon is perched perpendicularly to the pharaoh. On the rear of the king's throne (the *serekh* could also mean "throne") is carved the *serekh* symbol with the king's name within the frame. By standing in a right-angle to the king, the falcon remains in the proper position as a part of the *serekh* motif.

The *serekh* was also featured in several other contexts. It appears on Middle and New Kingdom coffins, as well as in the form of a standard associated with

the pharaoh's ka.



## Papyrus (mehyt) - "Upper Egypt"

### **Papyrus Clump**

#### **(mehyt)**

**Appearance:** On the banks of the Nile and throughout the delta, tall papyrus (*Cyperus papyrus*) clumps and thickets flourished.

**Meaning:** The papyrus was a natural symbol of life itself and the primeval marsh from which all life came. Papyrus pillars were also said to hold up the sky. Papyrus shaped columns common in many temples may reflect this double symbolism.

As early as the beginning of the Old Kingdom, papyrus served as a symbol of Lower Egypt. The plant was often shown with the heraldic plant of Upper Egypt, lotus as a representation of the Two Lands, the united Egypt.

In art, the papyrus clump represented the marshlands. Naturalistic scenes of families wild-fowling often contained images of papyrus purely as its detailed and repeated hieroglyph.

Finally, papyrus represented the concept of "around" or "behind". The hieroglyph was frequently paired with the sa sign of protection as a depiction of the phrase "All life and protection are around".



## Phoenix (benu) - "Sun"

### **Phoenix**

#### **(Bennu, Benu)**

**Appearance:** The Bennu bird was a large imaginary bird resembling a heron. The bird may be modeled on the gray heron (*Ardea cinera*) or the larger Goliath heron (*Ardea goliath*) that lives on the coast of the Red Sea. Archaeologists have found the remains of a much larger heron that lived in the Persian Gulf area 5,000 years ago. There is some speculation that this bird may have been seen by Egyptian travelers and sparked the legend of a very large heron seen once

every 500 years in Egypt.

It had a two long feathers on the crest of its head and was often crowned with the *Atef* crown of Osiris (the White Crown with two ostrich plumes on either side) or with the disk of the sun.

**Meaning:** The Bennu was the sacred bird of Heliopolis. Bennu probably derives from the word *weben*, meaning "rise" or "shine." The Bennu was associated with the sun and represented the *ba* or soul of the sun god, Re. In the Late Period, the hieroglyph of the bird was used to represent this deity directly. As a symbol of the rising and setting sun, the Bennu was also the lord of the royal jubilee.

The Bennu was also associated with the inundation of the Nile and of the creation. Standing alone on isolated rocks of islands of high ground during the floods the heron represented the first life to appear on the primeval mound which rose from the watery chaos at the first creation. This mound was called the *ben-ben*. It was the Bennu bird's cry at the creation of the world that marked the beginning of time. The bennu thus was the got of time and its divisions -- hours, day, night, weeks and years.

The Bennu was also considered a manifestation of the resurrected Osiris and the bird was often shown perched in his sacred willow tree.

The Bennu was known as the legendary phoenix to the Greeks. Herodotus, the Greek historian, says the following about the Bennu:

"Another sacred bird is the phoenix; I have not seen a phoenix myself, except in paintings, for it is very rare and only visits the country (so they say at Heliopolis) only at intervals of five hundred years, on the occasion of the death of the parent bird."

Herodotus goes on to record that the Bennu bird came from Arabia every 500 years carrying his father's body embalmed in an egg of myrrh. This Arabian bird however was said to resemble an eagle with brilliant gold and red plumage. Before the phoenix died it built a nest of incense twigs and laid down in it and died. From its body a small worm emerged that the sun's heat transformed into the new phoenix.

Another story says that the phoenix rose again from the burnt and decomposing remains of his old body and took these to Heliopolis, where he

burned them.

The planet Venus was called the "star of the ship of the Bennu-Asar" (Asar is the Egyptian name of Osiris). The Bennu was also sometimes associated with Upper Egypt.



## Pool (she) - "Water"

### **Pool**

#### **(she)**

**Appearance:** The pool was the Egyptian symbol for any body of water. It was depicted as a rectangle transversed by parallel wavy vertical lines. Egyptian artistic canons decreed that all objects must be portrayed so that they are instantly recognizable to the viewer. Thus, pools were always shown as if the viewer were *above* the body of water, even though the rest of the image would be shown as if the viewer were standing to the side of the rest of the objects in the picture.

When Egyptians wished to convey the watery nature of other things, they would use the wavy lines of the pool on the object.

**Meaning:** Like many ancient cultures, the Egyptians believed that the world emerged from primeval waters. The Egyptians personified these waters as the god, Nun. The pool often symbolized these waters of the First Time. The young sun god was often depicted rising from a pool of water that represented Nun.

The pool was also related to the Afterlife, as seen in the image to the right. As water was greatly needed for survival in Egypt's harsh desert climate, the deceased was often shown drinking from a pool of water. Often a fruit-laden palm tree is shown growing from the pool. These images were very common in Egyptian tombs, and they were often accompanied by wishes for the deceased to "walk according to your desire on the beautiful edge of your pool." The Four Sons of Horus were also shown rising from a lotus that is emerging from a pool before the throne of Osiris in the Underworld. Finally, the Egyptians also portrayed deadly Underworld lakes of fire with the pool hieroglyph, but drawn with red, instead of blue.



## Praise (henu) - "Praise"

### **Praise**

#### **(henu)**

**Appearance:** This image is probably the final pose in a ritual dance of praise and jubilation called the "Recitation of the Glorifications".

**Meaning:** The use of the *henu* sign to show "praise" or "jubilation" has been found in all periods of Egyptian art. An enthusiastic form of acclamation and greeting, priests and officials welcoming the pharaoh as he appeared before the court often were shown in the pose. Figures greeting the sun-god as he rose above the horizon were also portrayed in the henu-pose.

The gesture was especially associated with a series of deities known as the "*ba* of Pe and Nekhen" Traditionally, they are shown performing the dance. Pe a name for the Delta city that is better known as the Buto and Nekhen is the Upper Egyptian city of Hierakonpolis. These deities were in the form of three men, one with the head of a falcon and one with the head of a jackal. They are typically shown as coronations scenes and at the birth of the pharaoh.



## Sa (sa) - "Protection"

### **Protect**

#### **(sa)**

**Appearance:** Various ideas have been offered as to the origin and appearance of the *sa* sign. Some of thought that it represented a rolled up herdsman's shelter or perhaps the papyrus life-preserver used by the Nile's boatmen. The hieroglyph appears in two forms. In the Old Kingdom, the lower section of the hieroglyph was undivided, while in the Middle Kingdom it was usually separated.

**Meaning:** The *sa* hieroglyph was a visual representation of the concept of "protection." It was often used in amulets and jewelry in hopes of rendering its protective powers over the owner. The *sa* was often used in compositions featuring other hieroglyphs such as the *ankh*, *djed* and *was* signs. It was also found used on magic wands or batons during the Middle Kingdom.

The *sa* was also associated with various deities such as Bes, Tauret and the lion (see above right) when emphasizing their protective duties and natures.



## Sail (hetau) - "Breath"

### Sail

#### (hetau)

**Appearance:** Ancient Egyptians wishing to travel up the Nile river had only to take advantage of the force of the prevailing winds that blew south. In art, river boats are typically shown under sail. The hieroglyph for sail was a determinative not only for words such as "sail" and "ship's captain", but for such words relating to the wind, and by association the concept of "breath".

**Meaning:** In the *Book of the Dead*, the deceased were often shown holding an unfurled sail as an illustration for Spell 38A: "Living by Air in the Realm of the Dead." The sail represents the breath of life which would be available to the deceased in the afterlife. Many times, the dead are shown holding a sail and the *ankh* ("life") which illustrated the idea of "the breath of life."

The hieroglyphic sail was also seen in many *Book of the Dead* illustrations in which the deceased must cross the celestial river in a boat. This river was often associated by the ancient Egyptians with the Milky Way. The boat the deceased used was powered on its journey by the sail which, once again, carries the connotation a breath and life in the afterlife.



## Scarab beetle (kheper) - "Sun"

### Scarab Beetle

#### (kheper)

**Appearance:** The particular species of beetle represented in the numerous ancient Egyptian amulets and works of art was commonly the large sacred scarab (*Scarabaeus sacer*). This beetle was famous for his habit of rolling balls of dung along the ground and depositing them in its burrows. The female would lay her eggs in the ball of dung. When they hatched, the larvae would use the ball for food. When the dung was consumed the young beetles would emerge

from the hole.

Millions of amulets and stamp seals of stone or faience were fashioned in Egypt depicted the scarab beetle.

**Meaning:** It seemed to the ancient Egyptians that the young scarab beetles emerged spontaneously from the burrow where they were born. Therefore they were worshipped as "Khepera", which means "he who came forth." This creative aspect of the scarab was associated with the creator god Atum.

The ray-like antenna on the beetle's head and its practice of dung-rolling caused the beetle to also carry solar symbolism. The scarab-beetle god Khepera was believed to push the setting sun along the sky in the same manner as the beetle with his ball of dung. In many artifacts, the scarab is depicted pushing the sun along its course in the sky.

During and following the New Kingdom, scarab amulets were often placed over the heart of the mummified deceased. These "heart scarabs" (such as the one pictured above) were meant to be weighed against the feather of truth during the final judgement. The amulets were often inscribed with a spell from the *Book of the Dead* which entreated the heart to, "do not stand as a witness against me."



### Sekhem Scepter (sekhem) - "Power", "Might"



### **Sekhem Scepter**

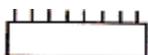
#### **(sekhem)**

**Appearance:** Many types of batons and scepters share the above determinative in written Egyptians. It is relatively difficult to differentiate between the various scepters and their respective offices. However, the glyph is generally understood to represent the *sekhem* scepter. The scepter appears to have originated in Abydos and as a fetish of Osiris.

**Meaning:** The *sekhem* scepter denotes the concept of "power" and "might". The word *sekhem* could also refer to divine beings, and even the stars, as "powers". The name of the warlike goddess Sekhmet means "Mighty One". The god Osiris was often called, "Great Sekhem" or "Foremost of Powers". Therefore, the sekhem was often used as a symbol of the underworld deity. Due to its association with the underworld god, the scepter also became an emblem of another mortuary god, Anubis. The scepter was often shown with the reclining god, as shown above.

After the 3<sup>rd</sup> Dynasty, the sekhem appeared in the royal names of the pharaohs, and later in the titles of queens and princesses as well. However, from the earliest times, viziers and other officials of important rank held the sekhem. Such officials were often portrayed holding the scepter in the course of performing their duties. The classic Egyptian funerary statue depicted the deceased with a staff in one hand, and the sekhem in the other. As a scepter of office, a pair of eyes were carved on the upper part of the staff.

The sekhem was also utilized in temple and mortuary offering rituals. The officiant who presented the offerings often held it. In such cases the scepter was held in the right hand and was waved four or five times over the offerings while ritual recitations were being made. A gilded sekhem scepter was found in Tutankhamun's tomb. On the back of this scepter were carved five registers depicting a slaughtered bull, which may indicate that the scepter was waved five times over the offering.



## [Senet Board Game \(senet\)](#)

### **Senet Board Game**

#### **(senet)**

**Appearance:** The senet board consisted of thirty squares in three rows of ten. The last five squares generally were marked with hieroglyphic symbols. During the Old Kingdom, each of the two players had seven playing pieces. Later on, this number was reduced to five pieces each. In fancier New Kingdom sets, the pieces were sometimes made in the form of kneeling, bound captives. Movement of the playing pieces seems to be determined by tossing knucklebones or sticks with different colored sides, similar to modern games which use dice. The rules of play are not exactly known.

**Meaning:** The senet game was connected to the afterlife. Senet boards were often placed in tombs (Tutankhamen was entombed with four, it is assumed that the game was a favorite of his). The game was supposed to be a pastime for the deceased. However, symbolically the game also was connected with the attainment of the afterlife by the dead. In many tomb paintings and *Book of the Dead* illustrations, the deceased is shown playing the game with no visible opponent. It may be that in these cases, the person is playing against the powers of the beyond. Winning against these opponents may lead to good fortune in the afterlife.



## [Shen Ring \(shenu\) - "Eternity"](#)

### **Shen Ring**

#### **(shen)**

**Appearance:** The shen ring is at first glance a circle with a horizontal line in a tangent along its bottom edge. However the shen is more than meets the eye. The shen was a stylized loop of rope with each end visible.

**Meaning:** In many cultures, the circle was a symbol of "eternity." Such symbolism is evident in familiarities such as the wedding ring of Western cultures, the Gnostic ouroboros and the ying-yang of China.

The same is true of the shen ring. Deriving its name from the root *shenu* (to encircle), it was almost always a symbol of eternity. However, the shen ring also held the idea of "protection." It most often carried this connotation when seen in its elongated variation, the cartouche; which surrounded the birth and throne names of the Pharaohs.

The shen frequently appeared depicted in the claws of the avian forms of the falcon-god Horus and various vulture goddesses. An example of this can be seen to the right. The shen was also depicted at the base of the notch palm branches held by the god of eternity, Heh.



## [Sistrum \(sesheshet\) - "Placation"](#)

### **Sistrum**

## **(sesheshet)**

**Appearance:** The sistrum was a musical instrument formed as a sticklike wooden or metal object, with a frame and small metal disks that rattled when the instrument was shaken by hand. The head of Hathor was often depicted on the handle. The horns of the cow were also commonly incorporated into the design. The instrument produced a soft jangling sound resembling a breeze blowing through papyrus reeds.

**Meaning:** The sistrum was called *shesheset* by the ancient Egyptians and was a favored instrument in many religious ceremonies and rites, especially those associated with Hathor. The sistrum's basic shape resembled the *ankh*, the symbol of life and carried that hieroglyph's meaning. The Egyptian name of the sistrum, *sesheshet* probably derives from the sounds the instrument makes: a soft jangling sound resembling a breeze blowing through papyrus reeds. It was this sound that was supposed to placate the gods and goddesses. It is believed that the sistrum might have originated in the practice of shaking bundles of papyrus flowers (papyrus flowers were a symbol of Hathor).

Although the instrument eventually entered the cults of other deities (such as Amon, Bastet and Isis), it was with Hathor, her son Ihy and her attendants that the instrument is associated with in most representational contexts. The sistrum seems to have carried erotic or fertility connotations as well. This probably derives from the mythological character of Hathor.

The distinctive shape of the instrument is found in many contexts ranging from small mortuary objects to the columns of temples, such as those at the Temple of Hathor in Dendera.



### Sky (pet) - "Sky"

**Appearance:** The hieroglyph that represented the sky depicted the heavens as a physical ceiling with the edges dropping down at the edges, to replicate the illusion of the sky reaching down to the horizon. It was often shown decorated with stars, to mirror reality.

**Meaning:** The sky was a popular motif in various architectural motifs, especially in Egyptian tombs. The ceiling of tombs were often painted blue and decorated with golden stars. It was also placed at the top of walls, door frames and gateways to symbolize the heavens overhead. The arching top of funerary

stelae also suggested the curvature of the sky.

The sky was personified by the goddess Nut, who was believed to arch her body over the earth. She held herself up on the tips of her fingers and toes. She was supported by her father Shu and other miscellaneous deities. These attendants were symbolized by the *was* scepters in a geometric framing device incorporating the sky and the earth. In the New Kingdom and the Late Periods, the king was often shown holding up the sky hieroglyph, and therefore symbolically upholding the gods and Ma'at.



### Star (seba) - "Afterlife"

#### **Star**

#### **(seba)**

**Appearance:** The Egyptians had extended knowledge of the night sky and the stars above. The circumpolar stars (the set of stars that seemed to "orbit" the North Star through the course of the night and thus never dipped below the horizon) were called the "Imperishable Ones". Most of the brighter stars were named by the Egyptians and they named thirty-eight constellations. These constellations were used to divide the night sky into "decans" (from the Greek word for "Ten"). The decans were called "the thirty-six gods of heaven and each ruled for ten-days each year.

The Egyptian symbol for the stars was a symbol five-pointed line drawing, resembling the sea stars (aka "starfish") that inhabited the Red Sea. In older examples, the drawing has rounder ends and the center is marked by two concentric rings. Egyptian star charts and decan tables often used dots or circles, as well as the hieroglyph.

**Meaning:** The infinite and unchanging nature of the stars overhead influenced the development of the Egyptian calendar and their beliefs regarding the life after death. Every Egyptian temple was a complex model of the cosmos and thus many images of the stars, constellations and stellar deities grace temple ceilings. In instances where the night sky was charted on the ceiling, brighter stars were sometimes designated by circles - like the sun disks. In decorative uses, the sky hieroglyph and the body of the sky-goddess Nut was decorated with five-pointed stars.

It was believed that the stars did not just inhabit this world, but in the *Duat* (land of the afterlife) as well. The Egyptians believed that the *ba* might ascend to the sky to live as a star in heaven. Many tombs also featured deep blue ceilings dotted with bright yellow stars in the exact image of the hieroglyph in hopes to make the *ba* feel at home in its new dwelling place. The stars were called the "Followers of Osiris and represented the souls in the underworld. The five-pointed star within a circle was the Egyptian symbol of the *Duat*.



### Swallow (menet) - "Souls"

#### **Swallow**

#### **(menet)**

**Appearance:** Various species of swallow took to the skies in Egypt. As Egyptian artists were never consistent in the coloring of the bird's plumage in their depictions, it is unclear which, if any, was the symbolic bird. By the shape of the bird's body in the hieroglyph and in painting, it is clear that the bird is definitely a member of the swallow family.

**Meaning:** During the Old Kingdom, swallows were associated with stars and therefore the souls of the dead. Chapter 86 of the *Book of the Dead* specifically instructs the deceased on how to transform into a swallow. In Spell 1216 of the Pyramid Texts, the pharaoh describes how he has "gone to the great island in the midst of the Field of Offerings on which the swallow gods alight; the swallows are the imperishable stars." The imperishable stars were those near the North Star that never seemed to rise or set, and therefore were "constant".

The swallow also appears in paintings of the solar barque as it enters the underworld. The swallow is usually shown on the prow of the boat. In this context, the bird appears to be an announcer of the sun's approach.

In Egyptian love poetry, the swallow declares the dawn of new love.



### Tree (nehet) - "Life", "Rising Sun"

#### **Tree**

## (nehet)

**Appearance:** Several species of trees were considered sacred in Egyptian mythology. The names of all of them were written with the same hieroglyphic determinative. In Egyptian art, trees were usually depicted by this sign by simply being placed into the larger representational context. It was been suggested that the tree shown in the glyph is the *Maerua crasifolia* which is found in throughout Africa, tropical Arabia, and Palestine, but is disappearing from Egypt.

**Meaning:** Several types of trees appeared in Egyptian mythology. The sycamore was particularly important. Two of them, called the "sycamores of turquoise" stood at the eastern gate of heaven from which the sun emerged each morning. These sycamores were especially associated with the goddesses Nut, Hathor and Isis, each of whom were called "Lady of the Sycamore". Nut and Hathor were often shown to reach out from the tree to offer the deceased food and water. Sometimes the tree was anthropomorphized, having arms itself which offer the sustenance to the dead. In the example shown at right, the deceased is suckled by such a tree.

The *ished* tree, probably the *Persea* tree, had a particular solar meaning. It too was associated with the rising sun and it was protected from Apep by the great cat of Heliopolis. This cat was one of the forms of Re. A sacred *ished* was grown in Heliopolis as early as the Old Kingdom. Later, an *ished* was grown in Memphis and Edfu. During the 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty a popular motif depicting the divine *ished* inscribed by the gods with the name of the king and the years of his reign.

The willow tree was also sacred in Egypt as it was the tree that was said to have grown up around Osiris' leaden coffin in Byblos. Several towns had tombs that were said to hold part of Osiris' dismembered body. All of these had willow groves associated with them. It was said that the god's ba rested within these groves.

Other various species of trees were believed to be sacred to individual deities. For example, the tamarisk tree was sacred to Wepwawet, the acacia was sacred to Horus, and as mentioned earlier the sycamore was sacred to Re and the willow was sacred to Osiris.



## Vulture (neret)

## Vulture

### (neret)

**Appearance:** At least five different species of vulture lived in ancient Egypt. The particular species shown in the hieroglyph was the griffon vulture (*Gyps fulvus*).

**Meaning:** The vulture was typically associated with the goddess Nekhebet who was the patroness of the city of El-Kab in Upper Egypt. When El-Kab became important early in ancient Egyptian history, the vulture soon became a heraldic creature for all of Upper Egypt. As such, the vulture was often shown with the cobra (the herald of Lower Egypt) wearing the white crown of Upper Egypt. She also appeared in the *nebtj* or "Two Ladies" name of the pharaoh.

The vulture was also a symbol of the goddess Mut, as well as Isis and Hathor. The bird also served as a symbol of the feminine, often in opposition to the scarab who signified the male principle.



### Was Scepter (was) - "Power"

## Was Scepter

### (was)

**Appearance:** The *was* scepter is a straight staff with a forked base and topped with an angled transverse section. The top of the staff was often shaped as the head of some fantastic creature, perhaps the bennu bird.

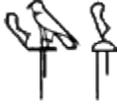
Originally, the *was* scepter may have been a fetish associated with the spirit of a sacred animal, or perhaps it was simply a herdsman's staff.

**Meaning:** The *was* scepter was a visual representation of the concept of "power" or "dominion." Naturally, its earliest depictions in Egyptian art found it in the hands of the gods and goddesses. The scepter was often also carried by the pharaohs. In later periods, it was sometimes shown in the mortuary portraits of private persons. To the right, a harp player performs for the god Horus who is seated inside a shrine. The shrine's roof is upheld by *was* scepters.

Variations on the *was* scepter were found in the hands of Osiris and Ptah. In their hands, the *was* scepter was combined with the *ankh* and *djed*.



### West (imenet) - "Afterlife"



## the West

### (imenet)

**Appearance:** The symbol for the west was portrayed in two fashions. The first was a standard topped with a feather and a falcon. The second was a round-topped pole with only the feather. The first symbol was used until about the 12<sup>th</sup> Dynasty. The second was first used in the 6<sup>th</sup> Dynasty and eventually replaced the earlier symbol.

The symbol was portrayed in Egyptian art in various degrees of personification. Sometimes the symbol had arms which would embrace a deceased person. Occasionally the symbol was shown as a woman with the sign on her head or with the sign as her head.

**Meaning:** The symbol for the west may be derive from the feathered headdresses of the peoples of the western desert. The falcon is probably a symbol of the sun god (Horus or Re) who sat in the west.

For the ancient Egyptians, the west (specifically the desert west of the Nile) was the destination of the dead. This is because the sun died every day in the western horizon, only to be reborn the next morning in the east. Most Egyptians were buried to the west of the Nile with their heads facing the west. The "Goddess of the West" (a woman shown with the hieroglyph of the West on her head) would receive the blessed dead in the afterlife. This goddess was originally developed as a persona of Hathor, who also occasionally wears the glyph on her head. In the image to the left, the blessed deceased is shown heading towards the western mountains where there is plenty of food and drink (the glyphs for "food" and "drink" are on either side of the



"mountain" glyph).