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Symbolism and Meaning of the Cornice Heart Amulets

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Heart amulets stand among the most important items of magical protection used in ancient Egypt. In previous studies we tried to identify the different contexts of use of the heart amulets through the study of its depictions in Egyptian art.⁽¹⁾ In the present study we propose a more detailed approach based on the analysis of the formal features of these objects. Most of the studies available so far have tried to establish a general meaning of this category of objects. On her work about the Egyptian amulets, Claudia Müller-Winkler accurately describes a wide variety of shapes, size, materials and symbols detected among the heart amulets and concludes that it is not possible to identify, among these objects, a single amulet considered as «typical».⁽²⁾ Given this wide diversity, we may expect that it is also hardly possible to establish a general meaning of the heart amulet. Therefore, we figured out as a crucial step to deepen our approach to detect formal criteria that could help us to establish different types of objects so that we could reduce internal variability among each category of objects. By doing so, we could then be able to study each type of heart amulets on its own in order to estimate its specific significance and symbolism.

Strictly based on formal criteria, namely the shape of the upper border of the amulet, we have proceeded to distinguish various types of heart amulets.⁽³⁾ Accordingly we have proposed the following categories: amulets with a rounded border (vase heart amulets), amulets with a square border (cornice heart amulets) and amulets without border (pendulum heart amulets). Surprisingly enough, we have found that within each category, internal variations both of formal features and symbolic depictions

(1) See R. SOUSA, «The meaning of the heart amulets in Egyptian Art» in *JARCE* 43 (2007), pp. 59-70.

(2) See C. MÜLLER-WINKLER, *Die Ägyptischen Objekt-Amulette*, 1987, p. 214.

(3) This classification cannot be applied to the heart amulets headed by a human or animal head or by a solar disk. Each one of these types of amulets needs to be understood as a category on its own.

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were indeed much limited in scope, which may allow us to think that in Antiquity they were actually seen as distinct types of heart amulets.⁽⁴⁾ We present in this study a brief description of the main morphological and symbolic features of the cornice heart amulet, one of the most important categories of heart amulets. Starting with a morphological description of these artefacts, we will also examine in this article the artistic rendering of this particular type of heart amulets as a way to reveal its symbolism.

Morphology of heart amulets⁽⁵⁾

1. THE CORNICE HEART AMULETS: DESCRIPTION AND CHARACTERIZATION

Usually, the heart amulets have a round border carved at the top of the body in order to separate it from the eyelet used for suspension. Unlike these amulets, the objects that we group under the classification of «cornice heart amulets» are provided with a square border. Interestingly enough, this feature is carved in such a way that it is remarkably similar with the cornice that usually adorns the edge of a sanctuary or of a temple gateway. In this particular class of objects the top of the cornice, always flattened, is carved with the eyelet for suspension. The cornice gives to the heart amulet a strong visual effect, especially when it is attached to the body of the amulet by a very elongated «neck».⁽⁶⁾

Another distinctive feature of the cornice heart amulets is the shape of its side projections. Although heart amulets are usually carved with side projections in order to represent the veins attached to the heart, their shape can differ quite a lot. Usually they have the shape of a simple button but

(4) The classification of heart amulets led us to propose a number of categories of the heart amulets. See R. SOUSA, «The heart amulet in Ancient Egypt: A typological study» in *Proceedings of the Ninth International Congress of Egyptologists*, 2007, 1, pp. 713-721.

(5) See also classification of formal features of the heart amulets in C. MÜLLER-WINKLER, *Die Ägyptischen Objekt-Amulette*, 1987, p. 212.

(6) See UC 38428, UC 22527, UC 38429 (Petrie Museum).

Fig. 1 — Cornice heart amulets. From left to right: AF 11531 (Louvre Museum), UC 38428 (Petrie Museum).

Fig. 2 — Cornice heart amulets. From left to right: E 18237 (Louvre Museum), UC 22527 (Petrie Museum).

Fig. 3 — Cornice heart amulets. From left to right: JE 85804 (Cairo Egyptian Museum), AEO 28353 (Louvre Museum).

they also may have the shape of the veins as they appear in the *ib* hieroglyph. These features of the side projections are rare among the cornice amulets. Typically, cornice amulet's side projections are very elongated and have a pointed shape.⁽⁷⁾ Unlike the other side projections, these ones may cover all the amulet's body. Sometimes they are so large and sharp that actually they resemble more to a pair of ears than to the cardiac veins.

Although cornice heart amulets can be very common in ancient Egyptian collections, only a few of them can be dated with some accuracy. From those that we have studied, no one can be dated before the 21st Dynasty. In fact the first known occurrences of this particular class of heart amulets were found among the wrappings of Psusennes I⁽⁸⁾ and Amenemope.⁽⁹⁾ Afterwards, in the Late Period, there seems to be an increasing demand for cornice heart amulets, since they can be found in huge numbers among later burials.

Usually, later cornice amulets are very little sized: the average size is not bigger than 2,5 cm,⁽¹⁰⁾ but many of them are even smaller.⁽¹¹⁾ In this context, an object measuring 3,5 cm can be seen as significantly large⁽¹²⁾ and an object larger than this is only seldom found.⁽¹³⁾ These small dimensions may well indicate that, although found in funerary context, these amulets could certainly be used by the living, which is not the case of the heart amulets commonly used in burials.⁽¹⁴⁾

Nevertheless, materials used for the production of these amulets may differ. A vast array of different stones can be identified from the usual

(7) Those are typical features of the heart amulets from the Late Period. In former periods side projections used to have the shape of a button or, most commonly, the shape of a cardiac vein.

(8) See JE 85804 (Cairo Egyptian Museum) in P. MONTET, *Les constructions et le tombeau de Psousennès I à Tanis*, 1951, CXIX. A good sample of this kind of amulets was found in the mummy of the king.

(9) See JE 86044 (Cairo Egyptian Museum) in *ibidem*.

(10) See CG 13216 (Cairo Egyptian Museum) in G. REISNER, *Catalogue Général des Antiquités Égyptiennes du Musée du Caire: Amulets*, II, 1958, pp. 51-52.

(11) See AEO 23346 (Louvre Museum) with 1,83 cm. Also SR 9245/CG 5227 (Cairo Egyptian Museum) with 1,8 cm. To this last object see G. REISNER, *Catalogue Général des Antiquités Égyptiennes du Musée du Caire: Amulets*, I, 1907, p. 2.

(12) See AF 11531 (Louvre Museum), with 3,13 cm. Also CG 12062 (Cairo Egyptian Museum) with 3,13 cm: in *idem*, p. 108.

(13) See 10.130.1806 (Metropolitan Museum of Art), with 5,0 cm. The largest object that we are aware of (nearly 9,0 cm) can be found in W. PETRIE, *Historical Studies*, 1911, pl. XIX. It is now exhibited in Cairo Egyptian Museum.

(14) Such is the case of the human and animal-headed heart amulets. Pendulum-heart amulets also seem to be used only in the funerary context.

cornelian⁽¹⁵⁾ to, most commonly, darker stones such as lapis lazuli,⁽¹⁶⁾ steatite,⁽¹⁷⁾ obsidian⁽¹⁸⁾, schist,⁽¹⁹⁾ green jasper,⁽²⁰⁾ and many others. The use of lapis lazuli and darker stones is surprisingly high among this particular type of heart amulets which perhaps might well indicate that blue and darker colours could be especially connected to this particular category of heart amulets. Notwithstanding the prevalence of the use of stone, other raw materials are also abundantly used in the production of these amulets, such as faience and glass. Many of the objects made of glass were very roughly fashioned suggesting the use of mass production techniques⁽²¹⁾ as the use of moulds to facilitate the production of large quantities of objects. These materials and techniques certainly played an important role in the considerable growth witnessed in amulet production and in its increasing use by a wider population. In some objects, the eyelet for suspension is not even pierced at all. They were made to be strictly wrapped within mummy bandages. Nonetheless we can also find finely carved objects made of stone, especially lapis lazuli⁽²²⁾ and darker stones⁽²³⁾ such as amazonite,⁽²⁴⁾

(15) See UC 38417 (Petrie Museum), Nr. 195 (Roemer and Pelizaeus Museum) or CG 53191 (Cairo Egyptian Museum). For this last object see E. VERNIER, *Catalogue Général des Antiquités Égyptiennes du Musée du Caire: Bijoux et orfèvreries*, 1927, pl. LXXXV.

(16) AF 8828 (Louvre Museum), AF 8822 and AEO 23438 (Louvre Museum). Also SR 9267/CG 12068 (Cairo Egyptian Museum): G. REISNER, *Catalogue Général des Antiquités Égyptiennes du Musée du Caire: Amulets*, I, 1907, p. 108. See also N. 321 (Liebieghaus): B. SCHLICK-NOLTE - V. HULSHOFF, *Aegyptische Bildwerke*, I, p. 324.

(17) See 247 (Musée de Picardie). See O. PERDU - N. MAHEO - E. RICKAL, *La collection égyptienne du Musée de Picardie*, n° 247.

(18) See n° 192172 (Michael Carlos Museum). See P. LACOVARA - B. TROPE, *The Realm of Osiris: Mummies, Coffins and Ancient Egyptian Funerary Arts in the Michael C. Carlos Museum*, 2001, p. 60.

(19) See AEO 10284 (Louvre Museum).

(20) See SR 9266/CG 5253 (Cairo Egyptian Museum) in G. REISNER, *Catalogue Général des Antiquités Égyptiennes du Musée du Caire: Amulets*, I, 1907, p. 6.

(21) Some of these objects show not only that they were made by the use of a mould but also that they were very quickly finished while the glass was still soft. See CG 13297 (Cairo Egyptian Museum) in G. REISNER, *Catalogue Général des Antiquités Égyptiennes du Musée du Caire: Amulets*, II, 1958, pl. XV.

(22) See AEO 23438 (Louvre Museum). See also SR 9267/CG 12068 (Cairo Egyptian Museum) in G. REISNER, *Catalogue Général des Antiquités Égyptiennes du Musée du Caire: Amulets*, I, 1907, p. 108. See also SR 9280/CG 5247 (Cairo Egyptian Museum) in G. REISNER, *Catalogue Général des Antiquités Égyptiennes du Musée du Caire: Amulets*, I, 1907, p. 5.

(23) See unidentified brown stone in Louvre E 18237 (fig. 2).

(24) See CG 53212 (Cairo Egyptian Museum). See E. VERNIER, *Catalogue Général des Antiquités Égyptiennes du Musée du Caire: Bijoux et orfèvreries*, I-II, 1927, pl. XCI.

serpentine, ⁽²⁵⁾ greywacke ⁽²⁶⁾ or schist. ⁽²⁷⁾ Some fine specimens of objects made of glass can also be found. ⁽²⁸⁾

The cornice amulets bear very simple decoration if any. Unlike earlier types of heart amulets, such as the pendulum heart amulets or the vase heart amulets, among cornice heart amulets clearly there is a simplification: instead of the complex depictions such as the scarab or the *benu* bird, we find simple geometrical patterns in the shape of stars. These particular patterns do not seem to have any resemblance to the anatomical features in the shape of the crescent and of the reticular pattern usually incised on the bottom of the object that are so typical of the depiction of the *ib* hieroglyph. ⁽²⁹⁾ Usually the geometrical patterns have the shape of a V ⁽³⁰⁾ or X ⁽³¹⁾ and sometimes can be combined with the depiction of the reticular pattern that resembles to a mound. ⁽³²⁾ More complex depictions than that are rare. An exceptional object was found among the wrappings of Psusennes I depicting the solar triad of Re, Atum and Khepri. ⁽³³⁾ As far as we know, only one other cornice amulet was carved with the depictions of gods and also in this object we find solar gods: Atum and Re. ⁽³⁴⁾ Both amulets were carved in lapis lazuli. Another interesting and very rare depiction shows the image of an ibis. ⁽³⁵⁾

(25) See AEO 31504 (Louvre Museum).

(26) See AF 9903 (Louvre Museum).

(27) See AF 8826 (Louvre Museum).

(28) See Louvre AF 11531 (fig. 1). Also SR 9245/CG 5227 (Cairo Egyptian Museum) in G. REISNER, *Catalogue Général des Antiquités Égyptiennes du Musée du Caire: Amulets*, I, 1907, p. 2.

(29) See SR 9264/CG 5250 (Cairo Egyptian Museum): *ibidem*, p. 6.

(30) See CG 13302 (Cairo Egyptian Museum): in IDEM, *Catalogue Général des Antiquités Égyptiennes du Musée du Caire*, n° 12001-13595: *Amulets*, II, 1958, pl. XXIX.

(31) See UC 22527 (fig. 2), UC 22526 and UC 38428 (fig. 1). Also BM 8128 (British Museum). To this last object see J. COONEY, *Catalogue of Egyptian antiquities in the British Museum*. IV. *Glass*, 1970, p. 16.

(32) See AF 11553 (Louvre Museum). C. Müller-Winkler also pointed out that these patterns cannot be identified with the anatomical features typical of the hieroglyph F 34 (from the Gardiner's list). See C. MÜLLER-WINKLER, *Die Ägyptischen Objekt-Amulette*, 1987, p. 214.

(33) See Cairo JE 85804 (fig. 3), in P. MONTET, *Les constructions et le tombeau de Psousennès à Tanis*, 1951, pl. CXIX.

(34) See Louvre AEO 28353 (fig. 3).

(35) See UC 38447 (Petrie Museum).

2. SYMBOLISM OF THE CORNICE HEART AMULETS

Curiously enough, the spread of the cornice heart amulet that we can detect in the archaeological records seems to be related to the contemporary use of the heart amulet as an iconographic attribute of the divine children. In fact, from the Late Period on, the heart amulet is used as an attribute of Horpakhered and Ihy and, as such, it is often depicted in the context of the temple decoration. Besides the heart amulet, these divine children wear other royal attributes such as the sceptres *heka* and *nekha-kha*, or the crown *pa-sekhemty* and the *nemes* headdress. ⁽³⁶⁾ In some circumstances, these gods are depicted over the lotus ⁽³⁷⁾ or the *sema-taui* motif, which is certainly allusive to a typical prerogative of the divine children: to guarantee the recreation of the world and the purifying return to the mythical time of the creation. It is not always easy to identify the type of heart amulet adorning the chest of the divine children but, when the quality of the sculptural work is highly enough, one can easily find the features of a cornice heart amulet clearly shaped: an elongated neck linking the cornice to the body of the amulet which can even be decorated by the typical geometrical pattern in the shape of a X. Elongated side projections can also be visible. Divine children are also depicted with the heart amulet in late statuary. In some fine statues we can easily recognise the features of the cornice heart amulet. ⁽³⁸⁾ The object is also found in the chest of the divine child depicted in the context of the vignettes of the weighing of the heart produced from the Late Period on. Given that pictorial information, our interpretation of the cornice heart amulet must necessarily consider the use of the amulet as an iconographic attribute of divine children.

Nevertheless, before we go further, we need to understand the significance of the cornice that gives to these amulets their singularity. First, we must have in mind that this particular element is a common feature of divine depictions such as Bes and Hathor. In fact, statues of Bes are

(36) See decoration of the temple of Dendera in F. DAUMAS, *Les Mammis de Dendara*, 1959. Many statuettes of the god depict him with these symbols: see the objects CG 38182 and CG 38176 (Cairo Egyptian Museum) in G. DARESSY, *Catalogue Général des Antiquités Égyptiennes du Musée du Caire: Statues de divinités*, I-II, 1905-1906, pl. X.

(37) See I. SHAW, *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*, 2002, ii. For depictions of the god over the *sema-taui* motif, see A. VARILLE, «La grande porte du temple d'Apet à Karnak», in: *ASAE* 53 (1956), pl. II and also J. HALLOF (and others), *Le Temple de Dendara: La Porte d'Isis*, 1999, pp. 34-35.

(38) See the bronze statue SR 46380 (Cairo Egyptian Museum). See fig. 4.

Fig. 4 — Depiction of a divine child wearing the heart amulet. Dendera, roman *Mammisi*. Note the typical features of the cornice heart amulet very finely carved: elongated neck, long side projections, body decoration with the shape of an X.

Fig. 5 — From left to right: Scene of the divine birth from the lost *mammisi* of Ermant (Drawing after R. LEPSIUS, *Denkmäler*, Abth. IV, B1.59), hathoric columns, temple of Hathor, Dendera.

frequently headed by a similar cornice: they have a flattened top and a curved neck. Curiously enough, in some Bes amulets, the eyelet for suspension is carved in the top of the cornice, just as it appears in the cornice heart amulets. The cornice also appears in the hathoric *sistrum*, just above the head of the goddess, where it usually supports the depiction of a temple. The interesting thing is that both gods are in fact symbolically related, especially in the temple structures known as *mammisi*, where the top of the hathoric columns is often carved with the depictions of the god Bes or with scenes related to the divine birth. Therefore, we can risk to say that the cornice motif could have been seen as the symbol of the temple where the regeneration or the rebirth of the divine children took place. As such, the cornice could have been mingled together with the heart amulet in order to provide to its user the regeneration or the rebirth of which Horpakhhered or Ihy were the symbol. That is to say that, when used by the living, the amulet could be understood as an apotropaic object with healing and regenerative powers.⁽³⁹⁾ On the other hand, when used by the dead, among mummy wrappings, the object could provide regeneration and rebirth. Note that, against the previous funerary uses of the amulet, from the Late Period on the heart amulet started to be used in great numbers: it is not uncommon to find three, four or even more heart amulets within the same mummy, most of the time spread over the entire body and not especially related to the position of the heart, as was the rule, especially during the Ramessid Period.⁽⁴⁰⁾ We think that this prodigality of the use of the amulet reflects the intention to provide a cumulative protection to guarantee the rebirth of the deceased in the afterlife, and not specifically to protect the heart as it is usually interpreted.

This same meaning seems to be underlined in the X or V shaped incisions detected on the amulet itself. Although its meaning is highly obscure, nevertheless they are intriguingly similar to the symbols that the Hemsut goddesses wear over the head in the scenes of the divine birth of the Pharaoh. If it is the case, once carved on the heart amulet, these marks might have been used as another symbol of protection to the divine birth (fig. 5).

(39) This use could be stimulated through the depiction of the heart amulet worn by Horpakhhered on the magical *cippi*, so much popular from the Late Period on.

(40) Among contemporary anthropoid coffins, this small version of the heart amulet is also a common attribute, where it can appear more than once. We know of a very interesting wooden anthropoid coffin from the Late Period with the depiction of a collar with three heart amulets. It is kept in the Medelhavsmuseet (Stockholm), but unfortunately without number.

3. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Cornice amulets did not become common until the Late Period. However, from then on they became the most prevalent item among heart amulets.⁽⁴¹⁾ Astonishingly, the cornice heart amulets started to be produced in a massive way precisely when the iconography of the divine children seems to increase. The wide use of the heart amulet in the iconography of these gods may, in fact, be related to the purpose of providing a cosmic renewal to the world. Since the divine children are, in the context of temple decoration, the embodiment of the divine nature of the Pharaoh, such cosmic renewal can be regarded as a political statement, especially in a period where the return to Egypt's origins was highly praised. Divine children could also be used in iconography as a symbol of resurrection or rebirth. On the vignettes of the weighing of the heart of the Greco-Roman period, the deceased appears often as a newborn solar child: in this context, although still connected with the weighing of the heart, the heart amulet seems to be invested with a wider obstetric meaning.⁽⁴²⁾ In fact it is a strong possibility that it became more and more depicted as a divine attribute of the infant gods and, as such, was used to propitiate the rebirth and a new life. It is perhaps with this meaning that the amulet was represented over mummiform gods of this period, where it decorates the centre of a huge and concentric *usekh* necklace. Such is the case of some corn mummies⁽⁴³⁾ and statuettes of funerary gods such as Ptah-Sokar-Osiris. On coffins and sarcophagi the amulet is also used as a symbol of rebirth.⁽⁴⁴⁾ In other words, during the first millennium, the heart amulet, especially the cornice version of it, seemed to be valued as a symbol of new life and rebirth, being a tangible sign of the power of light and purity of the divine children.

Little sized as they are, such amulets seem to have been used in earthly life as well as in the beyond, which certainly gives to them a significantly

(41) During the Late Period cornice amulets replaced older features of heart amulets such as the pendulum-heart amulets used on scales. See R. SOUSA, «Symbolism and Meaning of Pendulum Heart Amulets» in *GM* 221 (2009), pp. 69-79.

(42) To the meaning of the heart amulet in later vignettes of the Book of the Dead see R. SOUSA, «The cardiac vignettes of the Book of the Dead (Late Period)» in *BAEDE* 17 (2008), pp. 39-53.

(43) See Louvre Museum (E 12183).

(44) See sarcophagus of Setueret (Cairo Egyptian Museum, 23/1/21/9) or the coffin of Duasahotep (Cairo Egyptian Museum, 21/11/16/11). About this use of the amulet see R. SOUSA, «The meaning of the heart amulets in Egyptian Art» in *JARCE* 43 (2007), pp. 59-70.

wide magical scope. Its increasing popularity is detected by the production of roughly produced artefacts, certainly intended to be cheaper and to be used by commoners. On the other hand, very finely crafted artefacts show that the amulet was also highly praised by the elite of the time.

According to the elements collected so far we can admit that the magical scope of the cornice heart amulets seems to be largely connected with the symbolism of the divine children. In fact, it seems likely that the cornice heart amulet was specifically used as an attribute of the divine children and, as such, it could be understood as a symbol of magical protection *per se*. On later *cippi* of Horpakhered, the god wears the heart amulet while he is defeating the beasts that embody the evil forces of Seth.⁽⁴⁵⁾ It is therefore possible that the amulet was seen as an embodiment of the apotropaic power of the infant gods, being therefore used by the living as a healing and apotropaic symbol. On the other hand, when used in the funerary context, the amulet could provide protection to the rebirth that followed the weighing of the heart and perhaps was seen as a symbol of the manifestation of the deceased as the newborn sun, which explain the unusual depictions of the solar gods on some of these artefacts.

Rogério SOUSA

(45) See CG 9402 (Cairo Egyptian Museum) in É. CHASSINAT, *Catalogue Général des Antiquités Égyptiennes du Musée du Caire: Textes et dessins magiques*, 1903, pl. II.

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Rédaction: A. MARTIN (*Rédacteur en chef*), H. DE MEULENAERE (*Égypte pharaonique*), A. MARTIN (*Égypte gréco-romaine*), J. BINGEN (*Égypte chrétienne*).

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