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### A scaraboid to the glory of Pharaoh Amenhotep III



Fig. 1. Scaraboid commemorating the wild bull hunt of Amenhotep III. FGA-ARCH-EG-0228.  
© Photographic credit : Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Genève. Photographer : Grégory Maillot.



In ancient Egypt, the scarab was an important solar symbol, representing the rising sun at dawn. Countless amulets were carved in the form of this beetle. The underside of these objects, often small, could be engraved with a short inscription such as a name or a religious formula. The object presented here belongs to this family, but King Amenhotep III reinvented its use: this scaraboid serves as a propaganda tool for the glory of the sovereign!

*Scaraboid commemorating the wild bull hunt of Amenhotep III*

Origin unknown  
New Kingdom, 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, reign of Amenhotep III,  
(1387 – 1350 BC)  
Glazed steatite  
11,5 cm high, 6,7 cm wide, 2,6 cm deep  
FGA-ARCH-EG-0228

**Provenance**

Galerie François Antonovich, Paris, before 2003.

### A scaraboid of exceptional quality

This remarkable object is carved from steatite, a soft stone with grey shades, and retains much of its original bluish glaze. It is one of a large group of scarabs, the flat, oval reverse of which is inscribed with hieroglyphic text commemorating the deeds of King Amenhotep III. It is distinguished from its peers by the unusual shape of its opposite side, which is domed, smooth and pierced with two transverse holes, whereas the other examples all take the naturalistic form of the dung beetle, a strongly emblematic insect in the Egyptian civilisation. The only other known exception is a scarab of Amenhotep III in the Cleveland Museum of Art, which is so similar to the FGA scarab that the two objects can be considered twin brothers. (fig. 2, 3)<sup>1</sup>.



Fig. 2. Commemorative Scaraboids of Amenhotep III : flat side. Left : FGA-ARCH-EG-0228. © Photographic credit : Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Genève. Photographer : Grégory Maillot. Right : Cleveland, Museum of Art 84.36. Image in public domain CCO.

<sup>1</sup> BERMAN, Lawrence M.; BOHÁČ, Kenneth J., *Catalogue of Egyptian Art*: p. 294-96.



Fig. 3. Commemorative Scaraboids of Amenhotep III : domed side. Left : FGA-ARCH-EG-0228. © Photographic credit : Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Genève. Photographer : Aurélie Quirion. Right : Cleveland, Museum of Art 84.36. Image in public domain CC0.

It is surprising that the anatomical features of the beetle are not mentioned here, and several hypotheses have been put forward concerning the apparent originality of the domed face of these two scaraboids. They could be training models presenting an original and perfect version of the text and not intended for display. However, their high material quality and fine execution make them objects of prestige, indicating on the contrary their purpose of indexing and displaying royal power. In this sense, it can be assumed that these objects were originally composed of an additional removable part, now lost, which was attached to the domed side by means of the two drilled holes. One can imagine that this element took the form of a scarab, perhaps made of a precious material such as gold or silver.

The flat face of the object is carefully polished and displays a horizontal hieroglyphic text inscribed in 16 registers. They are separated horizontally by neat lines and a thin frame encircles the whole text (fig. 4). The signs are finely engraved and read from right to left. Only a few chips have damaged the edge, but the text, which relates the prowess of the pharaoh during a wild bull hunt early in his reign, has not been damaged. Known from five other copies<sup>2</sup>, this text is very similar to the versions inscribed on the Cleveland scaraboid and the

<sup>2</sup> 1. Cleveland, Museum of Art (CMA 84.36) ; 2. London, British Museum (EA 55585) ; 3. Unknown location, probably a private collection (ex collection Groppi) ; 4. Jerusalem, Israel Museum (IMJ 76.18.244) ; 5. London, Petrie Museum (UC15798). See SCHLÖGL, Hermann A.; BUXTORF, Regine; BRODBECK, Andreas (coll.), *Kunst und Handwerk*, p. 2-7.



British Museum scarab, although with slight discrepancies. It is, moreover, the one that presents the finest quality of inscription and is the best preserved today, along with the Cleveland scaraboid.



Fig. 4. Hieroglyphic inscription in sixteen registers on the flat face of scaraboid FGA-ARCH-EG-0228.  
© Transcription Aurélie Quirion. Photographic credit : Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Genève. Photographer : Grégory Maillot.

The remarkable state of preservation makes it possible to recognise each sign and thus to propose a transcription (fig. 4), as well as the complete transliteration and translation of the text (below). Comparing the hieroglyphs with the translation, the reader can easily have fun identifying, for example, the numbers present in the text: a line for a unit, a horseshoe-shaped sign for a ten, and a small spiral-shaped string for a hundred. Like us, the ancient Egyptians used a decimal system, and could therefore repeat each of these signs up to nine times: nine lines indicate the number nine, and so on.





1. *h3t-sp 2 hr hm n*
2. *nh Hr k3 nht h<sup>c</sup>-m-M3<sup>c</sup>t nbty smn hpw*
3. *sgrh-t3wy bik nbw 3-hpš hw-sttiw nsw biti nb t3wy nb-M3<sup>c</sup>t-R<sup>c</sup>*
4. *s3 R<sup>c</sup>Imn-htp hk3-w3st di nh hmt nsw wrt Tyi nh<sup>c</sup>ti mi R<sup>c</sup> bi3wt hprwt*
5. *r tn hm=f iw=tw r dd n hm=f iw wn sm3w hr h3st*
6. *nt<sup>3</sup> w n štp n<sup>c</sup>it hm=f m wi3 nsw h<sup>c</sup>-m-M3<sup>c</sup>t<sup>4</sup>*
7. *hr tr n h3wy šsp tp<sup>5</sup> w3t nfrt spr m htp r w n štp*
8. *hr tr n dw3w h<sup>c</sup>t hm=f hr ssmt mš<sup>c</sup>=f tm m-h<sup>c</sup>t=f*
9. *shn=t(w) srw nhw nw mš<sup>c</sup> r dr=f mi kd=f hrdw*
10. *n k3p<sup>6</sup> r irt rsw hr n3 n sm3w ist wd~n hm=f rdit*
11. *ith=tw nn sm3w m sbty hn<sup>c</sup> šdy wdi*
12. *{~n hm=f}<sup>7</sup> r nn sm3w r 3w=sn rht n iriw 170 rht*
13. *in hm=f m bhs m hrw pn sm3w 56 w3h~in hm=f hrw 4*
14. *m wš<sup>8</sup> rdit srf n ssmwt=f h<sup>c</sup>t hm=f hr ssmt*
15. *rht n sp 2<sup>9</sup> sm3w jn~n=f m bhs sm3w 40*
16. *dmd sm3w 96*



Fig. 5. Detail : bull hieroglyph.


① Year 2 (of the reign of) the majesty ② the Living Horus « The victorious bull, appearing in Maat », He of the Two Ladies « Who has establishes laws ③ and pacifies the Two Lands », the Golden Falcon « Great of khepesh, smiting the Asiatics », the King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Lord of the Two Lands Neb-Maât-Rê, ④ the Son of Ra, Amenhotep, Ruler of Thebes, living.



The great royal wife, Tiye, may she live like Ra !

Of the wonders that have befallen ⑤ this majesty : one came to tell his majesty that there were wild bulls in the desert ⑥ in the district of Chetep<sup>10</sup>. And his majesty to sail north in his royal boat « Appear-in-Maat », ⑦ at dusk. A good journey began and (she) arrived safely in the district of Chetep, ⑧ at dawn. His majesty appeared on a horse, his entire army at his side.

<sup>3</sup> The sign *n* is rendered with an unusually curved shape .



<sup>4</sup> All five other versions of the text include the expression *m hd* in this sentence : *n<sup>c</sup>it hm=f m hd m wi3 nsw h<sup>c</sup>-m-M3<sup>c</sup>t*. See SCHLÖGL, Hermann A.; BUXTORF, Regine; BRODBECK, Andreas (coll.), *Kunst und Handwerk*, p. 8.

<sup>5</sup> The lexeme *tp* is written with two *p*-signs, instead of the usual .

<sup>6</sup> The lexeme *k3p* is written here with the sign , instead of the usual ; the same is visible on the Cleveland Museum of Art and British Museum parallels. See SCHLÖGL, Hermann A.; BUXTORF, Regine; BRODBECK, Andreas (coll.), *Kunst und Handwerk*, p. 9.

<sup>7</sup> The subject of the sentence (*~n hm=f*) is missing in this version of the text, unlike in the five parallels (SCHLÖGL, Hermann A.; BUXTORF, Regine; BRODBECK, Andreas (coll.), *Kunst und Handwerk*, p. 9). This mistake may have been caused by the change of line, which often creates this type of error.

<sup>8</sup> A small, rounded sign is written above the *w* ; it is not present in the other versions of the text. See SCHLÖGL, Hermann A.; BUXTORF, Regine; BRODBECK, Andreas (coll.), *Kunst und Handwerk*, p. 10.

<sup>9</sup> The sign used here for *sp 2* is , instead of the expected .

<sup>10</sup> Probably in Wadi Natrun, see RITNER, Robert K., « The site of the wild bull-hunt », p. 193-4.



⑨ The officials, the members of the entire army, ⑩ as well as the children of the royal academy (*kap*) were instructed to be attentive to these wild bulls. His majesty then ordered that ⑪ these wild bulls be led into an enclosure with a ditch. {His majesty} went ⑫ to all these wild bulls. Number of animals: 170. Number taken ⑬ by his majesty during the hunt on this day: 56 wild bulls. His majesty stayed away for 4 days, ⑭ due to the need to give his horses a rest. His majesty appeared again on a horse. ⑮ Number of wild bulls he took during the hunt: 40 wild bulls. ⑯ Total : 96 wild bulls.

### Egypt, the heart of a gigantic empire

This royal scaraboid has aesthetic qualities that reflect Egypt at the time it was carved. When he ascended the throne at a very young age, Amenhotep III inherited not only a stable country, but an enormous empire of which the ancestral Egyptian territory was only the heart. The previous golden age, the Middle Kingdom (2135 – 1781 BC), had been followed by a period of instability and division - the Second Intermediate Period (1781 – 1650 BC), with northern Egypt occupied by the Hyksos, a foreign people. At the same time, Egyptian kings ruled the south from their capital of Thebes, the ancient Uaset, known today as Luxor (Fig. 6).



Fig. 6. Great colonnade built during the reign of d'Amenhotep III, Louxor temple.  
© Wikipedia. Photographer : I. Rémi, CC BY-SA 3.0.

It was finally King Ahmose who succeeded in reunifying Egypt and retaking the north from the Hyksos. For this reason, he is commemorated as the founder of the 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, although he is the legitimate heir of his predecessors of the 17<sup>th</sup> Dynasty. But Ahmose was not content with freeing his country from foreign rule: in order to secure his borders, he led expeditions to the Near East as far as Biblos. He sowed destruction on his way, with a clear goal: to harm the Hyksos and prevent them from regaining enough strength from these lands to be able to threaten Egypt again. In the south, he attacked Nubia, which had benefited from the Egyptian instability of the previous two centuries. Ahmose reached the second cataract of the Nile. His successors did not cease to reinforce this Egyptian control in the north as well



as in the south, by carrying out great military campaigns of which the kings of the 18<sup>th</sup> dynasty were proud, in particular Thutmose I, who reached the Euphrates and the fourth cataract of the Nile. In particular, he had an exceptional frontier stela engraved at Kurgus, nearly 1300 kilometres upstream from Aswan (Fig. 7).

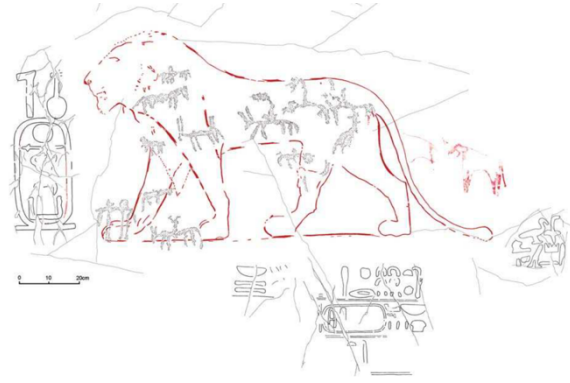


Fig. 7. The cliff of Hagar el-Merwa at Kurgus, Sudan, and detail of the inscription engraved during the military expedition of Pharaoh Thutmose I.

After DAVIES, W.V., « Nubia in the New Kingdom », fig. 2 and 9.

Amenhotep III is the direct heir of the great Thutmose and of his grandson Thutmose III, himself a great warrior. Since the reign of his father Thutmose IV, Egypt reaps the benefits of all these military campaigns: the region is almost pacified, diplomatic negotiations allow the establishment of a peace treaty between the king and the powerful kingdom of Mitanni, whose heart was in the north-east of modern Syria. The Egyptian empire thus controlled a gigantic territory, as well as production and trade, especially of precious materials such as gold and ivory.

Thutmose IV and his successors no longer had the opportunity to shine on the battlefield. Instead, the emphasis was on the divine status of the ruler, closely linked to the cult of the sun, which reached its apogee during the reign of Amenhotep III's son, the famous Akhenaten. The production of luxurious objects also reached a peak, of which the scaraboid of the FGA was undoubtedly a part, if it was indeed incorporated in a precious metal beetle figurine. Of course, few of these extraordinary treasures have survived to the present day, but the famous material uncovered in King Tutankhamen's tomb – just a century ago – gives us a dazzling glimpse of these wonders.





## The court of the king

In parallel to the changes in the perception of the king's person, we notice that that of the queen-mother also evolves. Although Amenhotep III is the legitimate son of Thutmose IV, his mother was only a secondary wife of the latter; it is her son who gives Mutemwya the title of 'Great Royal Wife' retrospectively, after she has become Queen Mother (fig. 8, left). But the woman who plays the biggest role in Amenhotep's life is his own Great Royal Wife, Queen Tiye (fig. 8, right). They were married at a very young age, at the latest in the second year of his reign, when he was probably only thirteen or fourteen years old, as another commemorative scarab tells us (see below).



Fig. 8. Left: the Queen Mother Mutemwya incised on a wall of the Luxor Temple. © Antikforever.com. Right: the Great Royal Wife Tiye in the Ägyptisches Museum, Berlin (ÄM 21834). © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung CC BY NC SA. Photographer: Sandra Steiß.

Although the king and court moved around the country, it was mainly in Memphis that they spent the first part of the reign. Later, a palace with a gigantic port installation was built in Luxor, on the site of Malqata. Crowned young, Amenhotep III enjoyed a long life, which allowed him to celebrate three *sed* festival, supposed to regenerate the king. His grandfather



had also reigned long enough to experience such a ceremony, but the grandson took things very seriously. He had the old archives researched in order to give his celebrations the lustre of the festivals of old, the likes of which no one had seen in Egypt for centuries. The grandiose palace of Malqata was the perfect setting for these ceremonies (fig. 9).



Fig. 9. Reconstitution of the columned hall leading to the throne room of the palace of Malqata.  
© Paul François & Franck Monnier, <https://www.arce.org/resource/virtual-malqata>.

### Scarabs galore: international royal propaganda

The scarab, a symbol of creation, was often used by the Egyptians as a form of amulet. During the 18th Dynasty, from the reign of Hatshepsut (1479 – 1458 BC) onwards, a new type of royal scarab appeared, containing historical and commemorative texts. Following the model of his forebears, Amenhotep III had nearly two hundred exceptionally large scarabs produced, bearing long texts commemorating the important events of his reign. These scarabs form five distinct groups, depending on the text they contain: the lion hunt (fig. 10); the glory of Queen Tiye, wife of Amenhotep III; the digging of an artificial lake; the bull hunt; and finally, the arrival of Kilughepa, a princess from the Mitanni kingdom.



All these scarabs date from the earlier part of the reign of Amenhotep III, when the king was still young. They were found in Egypt, but also in Sudan and the Near East, which demonstrates a desire for wide distribution within the kingdom, if not beyond. More than simply providing information about historical facts, they play an important role in royal propaganda. Indeed, although they may relate facts that are partly real, they are mainly centred on themes linked to the affirmation of royal power.



Fig. 10. Scarab commemorating the lion hunts of Amenhotep III, FGA-ARCH-EG-0073.

© Photographic credit : Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Genève. Photographer : Grégory Maillot.



Fig. 11. Detail of the Narmer Palette (*verso*), 1<sup>st</sup> Dynasty, Cairo Museum (CG 14716).  
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For example, the wild bull hunt is supposed to take place when the king is only about twelve years old and probably does not yet possess the strength or agility required for such a sporting feat. Nevertheless, the bull has been a strong royal symbol since the beginning of Egyptian history. Thus, in the classical iconography the king wears the tail of a bull on his belt (fig. 11). Moreover, the titulary of the kings includes the title of "mighty bull" since the reign of Tutmosis I. The scarabs of Amenhotep III describing the hunting of bulls thus allow the young king to be presented in a particularly strong position and in the same line as his ancestors.

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