SMALL OBJECTS, GREAT MEANINGS

The Study of Egyptian Amulets as a Decolonial Practice

LOSS AND MEMORY

Amulets were magical objects created to protect those who wore them. They may be regarded as miniature reflections of the world, encompassing every element of nature and Egyptian thought: plants, animals, symbols, objects, and divine beings. Each embodied multiple layers of significance that were, however, largely effaced by practice particularly widespread in the nineteenth century - **their sale on the antiquities market**. Small, portable, and aesthetically appealing, amulets became highly desirable to dealers and collectors.



Group of heart-shaped amulets, most of which were acquired on the antiquities market between 1882 and 1888. They are now part of the Museo Egizio collection. Among them is also a forgery, which combines features of different amulets, created to be sold at a higher price and thereby stripped of any meaning.

This commerce entailed a substantial loss of contextual information and cultural significance, rendering the reconstruction of their histories exceedingly difficult. For decades, moreover, **amulets were interpreted within Western frameworks** that imposed categories foreign to their culture of origin, thereby obscuring their meaning and value. The broader sphere to which they properly belonged – **magic** – was dismissed as **superstition**, far from Egyptian perceptions of a vital field in both life and death.

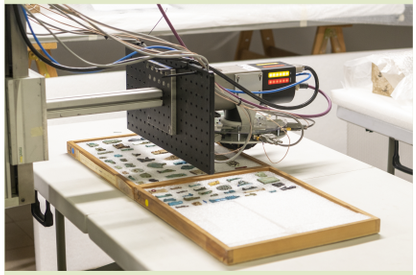
MUSEUM AS A PLACE OF CARE

In a context of fragmented and forgotten memories, the **Museum** must become a **place of care and dialogue**.
Care is exercised through **research**: studying artefacts allows us to reconstruct the meanings they once held and to restore their value in the present.



Analysis and study of amulets in the Museum's storerooms.

A case in point is the ongoing investigation of the amulets in the Museo Egizio: Egyptological research has sought to reconstruct their meanings, functions, and chronologies, but the work did not end there. The Museum also examined the materiality of the amulets, investigating how they were made and, consequently, the people and social structures behind their production. To this end, non-invasive archaeometric analyses, such as XRF mapping, have been carried out.



XRF mapping analysis in progress on a group of amulets from the collection, as part of the broader research project known as the "*Progetto amuleti*".

Through this **dialogue between objects and researchers**, the amulets no longer remain silent in the display case but regain their voice, narrating the history of the culture that created them and acquiring new significance today.

DECOLONISING THE GAZE

Research allows the Museum to **reflect critically** on itself. The Museum is not static: it evolves in dialogue with the society and, in recent years, has become increasingly engaged with the challenges of decolonisation. Through research and interpretation, the Museum does more than preserve: it transmits memories of the past to future generations. In this spirit, the *Progetto amuleti* will make all its data accessible to both scholars and the public, offering new perspectives that move beyond Western-centric models.

But what does it mean, in practice, to decolonise a collection? The process is complex and cannot be reduced to a single strategy. One crucial step lies in shifting **perspective**: recognising that there is **not a single authoritative way of seeing and interpreting, but multiple ones** – first and foremost the viewpoint of the culture that produced the objects. For a long time, amulets were studied through Western categories, treated as the only valid framework – for example, by defining "magic" according to Western assumptions.

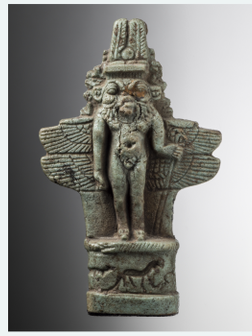


Display of amulets from the exhibition *Esplorare il mondo della magia: amuleti e faience.*

A first attempt to address these issues was the small exhibition "*Esplorare il mondo della magia: amuleti e faience*", which aimed to communicate the preliminary results of this research and to offer a more nuanced perspective on the material.

THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

A key contribution to decolonial practice lies in the **anthropological dimension** that emerges from the study of amulets. Although small and seemingly marginal, they preserve profound traces of human fears and fragilities. Magic and amulets were most often employed in moments of crisis – illness, weakness, childbirth, or death – as attempts to confront events in life that defied explanation.



Amulet depicting the god Bes, protector of the household, sleep, and children, and associated with music and dance.



Amulet depicting the goddess Taweret, protectress of women in childbirth and giver of fertility. Her aggressive appearance, with open mouth, was intended to ward off malevolent forces.

The analysis of this field therefore offers the possibility of uncovering aspects that are subtle and difficult to grasp, while also revealing an underlying **emotional universe**. These concerns express a shared human condition that transcends time and geography, pointing to an **identity** that is at once **collective** and **universal**. In this sense, "their" fears can also be recognised as "ours".

Looking ahead, the Museo Egizio plans to develop an exhibition devoted to these themes, enriched by visitors' voices, who will be invited to share their experiences and reflect on what an "amulet" means to them – creating a dialogue between cultures and across time.

MUSEO EGIZIO
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