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## Scarab Amulet-Beads from 1st–2nd Century Children's Burials at a Necropolis on the Iluraton Plateau, Eastern Crimea

*We describe a group of Egyptian faience scarabs unearthed from the necropolis on the Iluraton Plateau, Eastern Crimea, by the expedition from the State Museum of the History of Religion (St. Petersburg) in 1987–1990. Artifacts made of so-called Egyptian faience were found in eight of the sixty-two burials—those of girls aged below 1.5, dating to the 1st to early 2nd centuries AD. The most numerous among the faience items were beads in the form of scarabs. The analysis shows them to fall into three groups in terms of presence and nature of images on the reverse side: those without images (3 spec.), those with abstract images (3 spec.), and those with anthrozoomorphic images (2 spec.). In two cases, representations point to specific Egyptian workshops. Scarabs in girls' burials of the Roman period elaborate on the thanatological imagery, which originated among the Scythian-Saka tribes of Eurasia in the mid-1st millennium BC.*

Keywords: Necropolis, Iluraton Plateau, children's burials, Egyptian faience, amulets, scarabs.

### Introduction

This article describes a group of Egyptian faience scarabs discovered during the archaeological study of a necropolis on the Iluraton Plateau (Eastern Crimea) by the Expedition of the State Museum of the History of Religion (GMIR, St. Petersburg) under the leadership of V.A. Khrshanovsky. Sixty two burials from the 1st–2nd centuries AD, including 36 children's burials, were discovered at that necropolis in 1986–1993. In eight of these burials were found items made of so-called Egyptian faience, which are the most important examples of Egyptian imported items for this necropolis (finds of 1987–1990). The finds included scarab beads

and various pendants-amulets numbering, in total, 13 artifacts\* and 20 beads\*\*.

Penetration into the Northern Black Sea region of the Egyptian (primarily faience) items\*\*\* made in

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\*For the catalogue and typological analysis of the finds from the Northern Black Sea region, see (Alekseeva, 1972, 1978). For the study summarizing the evidence from the Crimea, see (Stoyanova, 2006).

\*\*Some glass items were obviously also Egyptian in origin, but their attribution is a topic for a special study.

\*\*\*For general information on the Egyptian items found in the Northern Black Sea region, see (Touraïeff, 1911; Korostovtsev, 1957; Piotrovsky, 1958; Hodjash, 1992b); in the

Naucratis began in the 6th century BC and is known from the finds on Berezan Island, Olbia, Tyras, and Chersonesus (Turaev, 1911; Matthieu, 1926; Bolshakov, Ilyina, 1988; Boriskovskaya, 1989; Levina, Ostroverkhov, 1989; Hodjasch, 1992a; Okhotnikov, Ostroverkhov, 1993; Hodjasch, 1999: 193–198; Chepkasova, 2011; Ostroverkhov, Nazarov, 2013). On the Bosphorus, these appeared in large numbers only in the Hellenistic period\*, which was initially associated with strong economic and cultural ties between the Bosporan Kingdom and the Ptolemaic Kingdom in the 3rd century BC (Treister, 1985; Edakov, 1990; Litvinenko, 1991; Skrzhinskaya, 2010: 88–95). In addition to numerous archaeological finds, onomastic evidence also testifies to the Egyptian influence on the Bosphorus (Matkovskaya et al., 2009: 312–314). In Egypt, the “Black Sea footprint” can be seen in the legend about the origin of the cult of Serapis from Sinope (Plutarch, *De Iside*, 27–28; Tacitus, *Historiae*, 83–84), although today this is considered unlikely (Zelinsky, 2010: 360, 451, n. 39–41).

In the Roman period, connections between Egypt and the Northern Black Sea centers resumed with new intensity, although the range of products imported from Egypt to the Bosphorus at that time was somewhat less diverse than in the Early Hellenistic period. Quantitatively, imports significantly increased, and Egyptian products found new markets in the nomads of both the Northern Black Sea region and more remote forest-steppe regions (Piotrovsky, 1958: 24–25). At the same time, if in the pre-Roman period, the items made of faience were of Egyptian origin, in the Roman period there were already several production centers of the “Egyptian faience”, for example, in Egypt, Iran, and even China (Ibid.: 25–26). Some scholars believe that such centers could have also existed directly in the Northern Black Sea region (Korovina, 1972: 111; Vysotskaya, 1994: 127). However, in that area, production of items in the Egyptian style was clearly not on a mass scale (Piotrovsky, 1958: 26). It is curious that on two occasions, the faience amulet-beads found in the burials on the Iluraton Plateau show features that link them precisely with the Egyptian center of production: first is an image of a ram (*Ovis platyrra aegypticus*) lying on a pedestal, which has no direct parallels (cf. (Aleksieva, 1978: Pl. 11–13))\*\* from burial 98 (Fig. 1); second is a scarab-bead from burial 114 (find of 1990, inv. No. A-1255/33-II) with an incused

figure of a jackal (Anubis?) on its reverse side, which also has no pictorial parallels in the Northern Black Sea region (cf. (Ibid.: Pl. 9–10, 13))\*. On the one hand, this quite definitely indicates the Egyptian production of the items; on the other hand, the choice of these images for the purposes of the funeral rite can be explained by the religious and eschatological ideas of the Iranian-speaking nomads. For example, the ram was associated among the Iranian peoples with the idea of *hvarno* (Vertiiienko, 2015: 92–95), while the dog played an important role as a guide to the afterworld\*\*.

A significant number of the Egyptian faience items of the Roman period from various regions of the Northern Black Sea region and Ciscaucasia have already been described\*\*\*, but the group of finds from the Iluraton necropolis, despite their value, have remained practically unstudied until now—although this topic has been touched upon in a number of papers (Gelfman, 1994; Tarasenko, 2013; Vertiiienko, Tarasenko, 2014; Vertiiienko, Tarasenko, 2018) and articles (Khrshanovsky, 2010). We will focus on scarab beads and consider them against the background of broader territorial, cultural, and chronological parallels.

All the items under consideration from the Iluraton necropolis were found in children’s burials (children under 1.5 years of age), which have been dated according to their grave goods to the period from the 1st to the early 2nd century AD. It is not possible to establish the sexes of the buried persons accurately, but in all likelihood these were girls. This assumption is also supported by the comparison with other contemporaneous children’s burials in the Crimea, with a similar composition of grave goods; for example, the burial grounds of Tiramba, Phanagoria, Opushki, etc. (Korovina, 1972: 105; Stoyanova, 2012: 74–75).

\*In the late 1980s, a scarab figurine with the inset image of an ibis (Thoth) was found at the Sarmatian burial ground of Sady (1st–2nd centuries AD), in the vicinity of Voronezh (Medvedev, 2008: 186, fig. 35, 10).

\*\*In the Iranian Zoroastrian representations, dogs accompany the gatekeeper of the afterlife Daena (Videvdat, 19.30) or act as independent guards of the Chinvat Bridge (Videvdat, 13.9). Dogs played an important role also in the ritual realm of the Scythian tribes (see, e.g., (Vertiiienko, 2017: 9, n. 7)).

\*\*\*See (Symonovich, 1961; Vinogradov, 1968; Aleksieva, 1972; Korovina, 1972; Korpusova, 1973; Anfimov, 1982; Burkov, Mirzoyants, 1987; Gushchina, Zatseskaya, 1994: 20–21, pl. 31, 33, 34, 41, 46; Vysotskaya, 1994: 125–127; 125, fig. 39; pl. 6, 9, 14, 15, 19–23, 28, 30, 31, 45, 46; Pyankov, 1996; Medvedev, 2008: 45–46; 114, fig. 23, 11–46; 184, fig. 33, 8; 186, fig. 35, 7, 10; 200, fig. 49, 1–10; pl. 2, a, b; Khrapunov, Muld, Stoyanova, 2009: 16–17, fig. 25–27, 29–31, 34; Mosheeva, 2010; Voronyatov, 2011; Stoyanova, 2012: 74–75; Dzneldadze, 2013, 2016; Burkov, 2013, 2015, 2016; Burkov, Gadalrab, 2017); cf. also (Saenko, 2018).

context of their penetration into the steppe zones of the region, see (Parmenter, 2019), cf.: (Vertiiienko, Tarasenko, 2018).

\*Although it should be mentioned that images of scarabs dated to the 7th–5th centuries BC have been found in Kerch (Piotrovsky, 1958: 23–24).

\*\*An animal with horns bent downwards, corresponding to the iconography of the sacred ram of Amun of Thebes (Kees, 1977: 78–81).



*Fig. 1.* Faience bead in the form of a ram from burial 98 ( $1.8 \times 0.6$  cm, find of 1989, inv. No. A-1253/50-II). © State Museum of the History of Religion (GMIR), St. Petersburg.



*Fig. 2.* Beads in the form of scarabs from burial 114 (after (Khrshansovsky, Khanutina, Kruglikova, 2007: 47)). © GMIR.



*Fig. 3.* Bead in the form of scarab from burial 58. © GMIR.



*Fig. 4.* Beads in the form of scarabs from burials 76 (1) and 98 (2). © GMIR.

### Descriptions of faience scarabs

The finds can be divided into three groups.

#### **Group I. Scarabs without images on the reverse side (3 spec.):**

1. Bead in the form of scarab from burial 98 (find of 1989, inv. No. A-1253/49-II). Its size is  $1.3 \times 1.0$  cm. The color is blue. The type is 45b (after (Alekseeva, 1978: 41; pl. 10, 5)).

2, 3. Two identical scarab-shaped beads from burial 114 (find of 1990, inv. No. A-1255/31-II and A-1255/32-II) (Fig. 2). Their sizes are  $2.5 \times 2.2$  and  $2.6 \times 2.2$  cm. The color is turquoise. The type is 50c (after (Ibid.: 42; pl. 10)).

#### **Group II. Scarabs with abstract images on the reverse side (3 spec.):**

4. Bead in the form of scarab from burial 58 (find of 1987, inv. No. A-1244/8-II) (Kublanov, Khrshansovsky,

1989: 26–27; Khrshansovsky, 2010: 593–595, fig. 8, 8) (Fig. 3). Its size is  $2.0 \times 1.6$  cm. The color is light blue. The type is 45b (after (Alekseeva, 1978: 41; pl. 10, 5)).

5. Bead in the form of scarab from burial 76 (find of 1988, inv. No. A-1252/21-II) (Kublanov, Khrshansovsky, 1989: 24; 25, fig. 9) (Fig. 4, 1). Its size is  $1.4 \times 1.1$  cm. The color is violet-blue. An inset image of snake with a groove





Fig. 5. Beads in the form of scarabs from burials 79 (1) and 114 (2). © GMIR.

is on the reverse side. The type is 45b (after (Alekseeva, 1978: 41; pl. 10, 7)).

6. Bead in the form of scarab from burial 98 (find of 1989, inv. No. A-1253/48-II). Its size is  $1.9 \times 1.5$  cm. The color is light green. An inset image of a snake with a groove is on the reverse side (Fig. 4, 2). The type is 48b (after (Ibid.: Pl. 10, 22)).

**Group III. Scarabs with anthropo-zoomorphic images on the reverse side (2 spec.):**

7. Bead in the form of scarab from burial 79 (find of 1988, inv. No. A-1252/70-II) (Kublanov, Khrshanovsky, 1989: 27) (Fig. 5, 1). The size is  $1.5 \times 1.2$  cm. The color is light turquoise. An inset image of a human figure is on the reverse side. The type is 50c (after (Alekseeva, 1978: 42; pl. 10, 9a)).

8. Bead in the form of scarab from burial 114 (find of 1990, inv. No. A-1255/33-II) (Fig. 5, 2). Its size is  $1.3 \times 1.0$  cm. The color is turquoise. An image of a seated jackal (Anubis ?, cf.: (Motouk, 1977: 382–383)) is on the reverse side. This image has no parallels in the Northern Black Sea region. The type is 50c (after (Alekseeva, 1978: 42; pl. 10, 9a)).

## Discussion

We will avoid the problem of the ethnic and cultural affiliation of the persons buried with the items made of Egyptian faience. A.V. Simonenko pointed to the presence of these items at the “Sarmatian, Meotian, Late Scythian, as well as Greek Antiquity necropolises”, yet emphasized that “on the territory of the Ukraine, beads and pendants made of Egyptian faience prevail in the main burials of the ‘Eastern wave’... these amulets are a part of the cultural complex of migrants, brought with them from their original places of habitation” (2011: 116). Relying on the available research, S.V. Voronyatov observed: “...Egyptian faience beads are one of the constituent features of the Middle Sarmatian culture” (2011: 96). The role of such things in the spiritual life of this population is more important for us. There are

hardly any doubts that in a new cultural environment, Egyptian items received a semantic status that was extremely different from their original meaning and was associated with the local magical, religious, and mythological realities (cf. (Vysotskaya, 1994: 124; Batizat, 2007)). These items should be viewed in the context of indigenous funeral traditions. The present-day interpretations of their meaning are highly ambiguous. For example, in the most general manner, many scholars have mentioned that the Egyptian faience items acted as amulets-apotropes or averters (Korostovtsev, 1957: 80–81; Piotrovsky, 1958: 24; Vysotskaya, 1994: 124; Falkovich, 1992; Pyankov, 1996: 99; Medvedev, 2008: 46; Mosheeva, 2010; Stoyanova, 2012: 91). However, this does not explain their absence in the adult burials at the Iluraton necropolis. I.N. Anfimov believed that these items played an ambiguous role in the religious and magical beliefs of this population: “Amulets in the form of scarabs, genitals, frogs, bunches of grapes, and doubled small cylinders were associated with the cults of fertility and childbearing. Figurines of lions, Bies, and pendants in the form of a fist with a fig sign served as apotropes” (1982). Such a functional division can only be conditional. According to A.V. Pyankov, the items discovered were related to healing magic (1996: 99) (cf. (Vysotskaya, 1994: 124)). However, those buried with these items did not seem to have needed medical treatment. A.K. Korovina proposed a hypothesis that the presence of Egyptian amulets in children’s burials testified to adherence of their parents to the Egyptian cults (1972: 111) (cf. (Chekhovskaya, 2011)). There is a fairly large amount of data on the distribution of the cults of Egyptian deities, primarily Serapis and Isis, in the city-states of the Northern Black Sea region since the Hellenistic period (see (Solomonik, 1973; Saprykin, 2009: 160–178)). Yet it is hardly possible to assume such a situation for the Sarmatian population of the Roman period, including the people who left their graves on the Iluraton Plateau. T.M. Gelfman focused on the image of Horus the Child/Harpocrates, depicted with a finger at his mouth (1994: 87). It is known that in the Greco-

Roman world he turned into a god of silence, which seems quite natural for a funeral cult. However, only two such amulets have been found at the necropolis of Iluraton so far, while eight scarab beads were discovered there\*. In addition, it is unknown to what extent the Greco-Roman perception of this image was spread among the so-called Barbarian tribes.

At the same time, the soteriological aspect of the semantics of the Egyptian scarab (Keller, 1913: 409–413; Bonnet, 1952: 720–722; Givon, 1984) as an image of reviving and creative energy of the morning sun, may have found a certain place in the beliefs of the Black Sea Greeks and nomads (Bogdanova, 1980: 86) (however, cf. (Vinogradov, 1968: 52)). In Ancient Egypt, the first scarab images\*\* appeared in the Middle Kingdom (2040–1650 BC) and continued to be used until the Greco-Roman period. The scarab was considered a sacred animal of the Sun, also embodying its special hypostasis of Khepri—a god of creation. At the same time, scarabs played an important role in the funeral and Osirian beliefs of the Egyptians (Stadler, 2001).

Of course, it is currently impossible to give a definitive answer to the question of the semantics of Egyptian symbols in the context of the funeral rite revealed by the examined Iluraton graves. Apparently, the answers should still be sought not so much in Egypt, but in the role the child played in the worldview of archaic societies in general (Tulpe, 2002; 2012: 59–65). As is known, before reaching a certain age and going through initiation, children were not considered full members of a community (that is, fully human) and had a kind of borderline status between life and death, order and chaos. In the event of death of a child, this inevitably required different actions during the performance of funeral rituals, and special grave goods, which at

the same time served as a sacrifice to the gods of the chthonic world. It is quite possible that the Egyptian items possessed exactly this semantic status among the nomads of the Eastern Crimea.

Scholars have long noted that beads made of Egyptian faience were found in the complexes of the Roman period only among the goods of children's (mostly girls') and female burials (Touraïeff, 1911: 31–32)\*, which quite clearly reveals the gender aspect for including these items into the realm of "female subculture" (Voronyatov, 2011: 97). Preconditions for this can be seen at the earlier stages of using Egyptian images, in particular the scarab, in the funeral rite of the nomadic aristocracy in the Northern Black Sea region. In fact, the items made of Egyptian faience have been often found in women's, less often in children's\*\*, Scythian kurgan burials in the steppe part of the Northern Black Sea region (Nosaki, Rogachik burial ground, Gyunovka, etc.) (Kurganniye mogilniki..., 1977; Boltrik, Fialko, 2007; Ostroverkhov, 2014: 43–45; 52, fig. 6, 1)\*\*\*. In the forest-steppe area, the only known scarab of Egyptian faience (Late Period) was discovered in 2019 in an undisturbed female burial at the Belsk fortified settlement (the Skorobor burial ground, 6th century BC)\*\*\*\*.

Notably, the association of the scarab image with the female burials among the Iranian-speaking nomads shows examples that are quite remote from the Northern Black Sea region. For instance, a scarab-seal with the cryptographic inscription "Amon" (*Imn*) was found in a Saka female burial 3, kurgan 2 (05) at the Kyrk-Oba II cemetery, in Western Kazakhstan (Eder, 2012: Pl. I, 125, 1, 2) (Fig. 6). This burial is dated to the 5th century BC, and the scarab-seal to the 7th–6th centuries BC (Ibid.: 191).

## Conclusions

The semantics of representations on the reverse sides of the scarab beads under discussion is generally associated

\*Generally, the available statistical data suggest that precisely the scarab figurines were the most common type of beads in the burial complexes under discussion (Vysotskaya, 1994: 126; Simonenko, 2011: 115).

\*\*These were originally used as seals (Newberry, 1906: 61–85; Petrie, 1917: 2–8). This function persisted for a long time and spread far beyond the borders of Egypt, including the Northern Black Sea region. B.A. Turaev noted that before the 14th century, rings with shields of engraved stone seals were called "zhukovina" (from *zhuk* – 'bug, beetle') in Russian language (especially in the Crimea) (Touraïeff, 1911: 35). In the charters written in the Old Russian language, this term was used until the 16th century to designate the rings that had a carved stone insert (Krysko, 1990: 270; Nelyubov, 2002: 4). According to the etymological dictionary of M. Vasmer, the meaning of "zhukovina" as a ring with a stone also survived in the Ukrainian language ("ring with a stone in a frame") (1986: 64). From the end of the Middle Kingdom of Egypt, scarab figurines were used as amulets (Quirke, 2003), and since the New Kingdom of Egypt, their production became widespread.

\*In addition, B.A. Turaev observed that even in his time the beads of Egyptian faience, accidentally discovered in the Crimea, definitely became women's adornments.

\*\*For example, three scarabs made of Egyptian faience were recorded in a children's burial near the village of Kut in the Dnepropetrovsk Region (kurgan 7, burial 3, 4th–3rd centuries BC) (Berezovets, 1960: 51).

\*\*\*Such finds are extremely rare at the Scythian fortified settlements of the Northern Black Sea region. As an example, we can mention the faience scarab found at the Annovka fortified settlement (Kherson Region) of the Late Scythian period (Gavrilyuk, 2013: 552; 555, fig. 9, 10, 12).

\*\*\*\*We would like to thank the site's researchers I.B. Shramko and S.A. Zadnikov (Kharkiv) for the information on this important find.

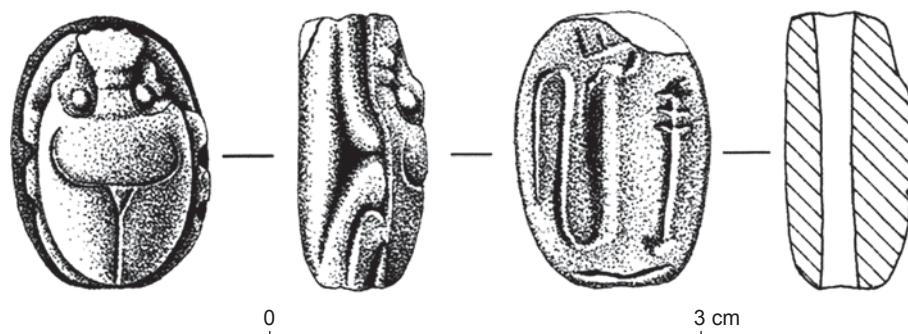


Fig. 6. Scarab-seal from burial 3, kurgan 2, at Kyryk-Oba II (after (Eder, 2012: Pl. I, 125, 2)).

with the feminine principle and idea of fertility, which well correlates with the idea of chthonicity of women among the Iranian-speaking nomads of Eurasia (see (Bessonova, 1991: 95)), and with the soteriological concept of the scarab symbolism. The interrelation of these two concepts in the form of the scarab beetle probably led to its perception in the Northern Black Sea region as a psychopomp or mediator between the worlds of the living and the dead. It is possible that exactly the image of the scarab influenced the “strange” iconography of spiders with three pairs of paws on the plaque from the Aleksandropol kurgan\* and on the sewn-on plaques from tomb No. 1 of the Melitopol kurgan (Terenozhkin, Mozolevsky, 1988: 91, fig. 98, 7).

Thus, our analysis makes it possible to suggest that in the perception of the scarab by the Iranian-speaking nomads, their own autochthonous ideas might have merged with the “Egyptian” beliefs. The local beliefs clearly manifest themselves in the gender-age aspect, with the obvious tendency: among the Scythians, sculptural images of scarabs are known predominantly from female burials, while among the Sarmatian tribes, scarabs became a stable attribute of children’s burials. This may be explained by a special position of women and children in ancient societies. During their burials, the sacrifice of “atypical” items (that is, those that possessed the expressive semiotic status of otherness), such as artifacts made of Egyptian faience, to the chthonic gods could be perceived as a pledge of birth of new life (procreation). In this respect, scarab beads from female and children’s Sarmatian burials of the Roman period, including those found in the graves on the Iluraton Plateau, apparently continued the development of the above general idea that had manifested itself already among the Scythian-Saka tribes of Eurasia in the mid first millennium BC.

\*The plaque is kept in the collection of the Sumtsov Kharkiv Historical Museum. We are grateful to L.I. Babenko (Kharkiv) for the photograph of this artifact.

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