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Egyptian Scarab: A Symbol of Renewal

When you look at this Egyptian scarab amulet, you see revival. Or at least that is what the ancient Egyptians saw. They carved these amulets to look like beetles because to them, beetles were the representation of new beginnings, the resurrection of the sun each morning, and renewal. And as we look at the scarab today and see the dung beetle, we can also see a representation of renewal in agriculture.

Egyptians used beetles as a representation of renewal because of the dung beetle (*Scarabaeus sacer*). These dung beetles would use elephant dung as a source of food and also a shell for eggs. The male dung beetles were the ones that would create round balls of dung for food on the surface that they would then bury, the females would burrow with pear shaped balls of dung with eggs beneath the surface. When the larva hatched, they would eat through the dung encasing before climbing out to the surface. While to the modern eye a beetle rolling balls of dung may not be symbolic of renewal, when ancient Egyptians saw beetles rolling and burying balls of dung (unaware of the eggs buried within) and then new beetles hatching from the ground, they viewed this as an act of creation. They saw the *Scarabaeus sacer* as completely male, self-repopulating species. Because of that, they used the image of the dung beetle to represent Khepri, the god of the rising sun, creation, and rebirth.

As a representation of rebirth and renewal, amulets carved in the shape of a beetle would help secure passage into the next life. Scarabs carved from a greenstone (a green rock) would be placed in place of the heart (which was seen as the seat of the mind) within mummies. These heart scarabs could be inscribed with runes that would help ensure the safe passage of the dead past trial to the next life. Scarabs could also be inscribed with runes that when recited would be used to protect those alive from either physical or spiritual harm. The runes on scarabs could also work as a seal. The designs could be pressed into clay and used to mark items with a personal sign.

Scarabs spread to other Mediterranean cultures, such as Phoenicia, Greece, and Etruscan, and while their complete background and symbolism was not always spread with them, they became a popular symbol and omen of good luck, like that of the sign of the cross now. They were linked to ancient Egyptian religion but could be used on their own. In fact, they soon became a popular jewelry motif and were used on rings and pendants.

These amulets were often carved from a soft stone and then glazed, making the amulet a steatite. But they could also be formed from carnelian, jasper, or turquoise and many were also glazed with a deep green or blue.

A religious representation of the sun god of renewal, the Egyptian scarab also represents a physical renewal of the earth. While dung beetles may not actually self-generate and renew as the Egyptians thought, they do have potential to revive the earth. Dung beetles create tunnels in which to bury balls of dung as food or for eggs. The tunnels they create through their burrowing can aerate soil, and by burying dung they return nutrients back to the ground.

This capability has been recognized to have potential in agriculture and farming, and in Australia a project was conducted where beetle species that could break down cow pats were brought in to disintegrate and control the cattle dung. The project was a success and as beetles safely broke down the dung, pasture health increased as nutrients were returned to the soil, and flies, pests, and disease decreased.

Using dung beetles also has the potential benefit of reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Cow pats can produce methane (a greenhouse gas) emissions which can contribute to global warming. Dung beetles can reduce the emission of methane by aerating the pats, keeping the carbon within the dung from being released as methane.

The Egyptian scarab displays how a species can renew in how they are important to culture. Originally valued as a symbolic representation, the *Scarabaeus sacer* now have a revival in what they represent as a solution to current problems. The recent decline in the population of this species caused by habitat loss and pesticides points to the need for a renewal in how we value them. Looking at the Egyptian scarab shows us one way to help revive the planet is to take steps to restore the population of the dung beetle.

Citation:

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