

Between the Legs and Beyond: Phallic Amulets in Ancient Egypt

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Despite the abundance of erotic imagery found in the ancient record, up until recently, scholars have tended to ignore its importance. Western perspectives on sex and sexuality often led researchers to code ancient erotic ideas or practices as taboo or improper. In a telling example from ancient Egypt, we find that small, phallic amulets were produced in high numbers, but years of modern censorship leave us with more questions than answers on their purpose and use in the ancient past.¹

As one might expect, scholarly works on phallic amulets are few and far between. Many of these objects are housed in private collections, making them inaccessible for study.² The primary cause of this gap, however, is the cultural conservatism that was commonplace among both early and modern archaeologists and researchers. Objects and shrines depicting phallic imagery have often been ignored, improperly recorded, covered, or worse, used as evidence of the Egyptians' barbaric nature.³

Erotic amulets made in the Late Period and beyond generally depict a male figure with a large, erect phallus between his legs.⁴ Most are made of blue faience, but some are made from limestone.⁵ Clearly associated with fertility and procreative power in both life and death, their full meaning and use escape us. Some of these objects have a suspension loop for wear, while others do not.

Phallic worship during the Græco-Roman period in Egypt primarily focused on deities whose powers were closely tied to their genitals and creative power, such as Min, Osiris, and later Bes.⁶ Unfortunately, since the amulets lack any of these gods' distinctive traits, they likely do not represent any well-known deities. The figures may be monkeys, an animal with ties to the notoriously ithyphallic god Bes, as erotic amulets from a similar period have been identified as such.⁷

Even when a historical topic is uncomfortable to discuss, it should not be ignored. Phallic amulets may seem strange or amusing to many but treating them as such continues to spread Western bias and perpetuate fundamental misunderstandings of ancient Egyptian culture. By confronting our own discomfort and moral biases, we can begin to study these artifacts in their appropriate cultural context to better understand ancient Egyptian beliefs about the body, sexuality, and the afterlife.

1. Jacques-Antoine Dulaure. *The Gods of Generation: A History of Phallic Cults Among Ancients & Moderns* (New York: Panurge Press, 1934), 63.

2. Lise Manniche, *Sexual Life in Ancient Egypt* (New York: Columbia University Press, 187), 7.

3. Dominic Monserrat, *Sex and Society in Græco-Roman Egypt* (Oxfordshire, Routledge, 2011), 172-4. Further, George Ryley Scott, claims that the suppression of religious phallicism started with the English translation of the Bible and has persisted over time. He purports that the difference between ancient and modern ethical standards is one of the main reasons scholars avoid the subject, as modern moral frameworks can prevent honest engagement with the past

4. Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, "Limestone seated erotic figurine," LDUCE-UC48364.
<https://collections.ucl.ac.uk/Details/collect/34406>.

5. Monseratt, *Sex and Society in Græco-Roman Egypt*, 173.

6. The Art Museum of the University of Memphis, "Seated male erotic amulet," 1994.4.60.
<https://amum.catalogaccess.com/objects/1740>

Further Reading!

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- The Metropolitan Museum of Art. *Macrophallic Figurine*. 2021.1.121.
<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/329899>