

Anubis, The Protector of the Body

Savannah Patterson

Death held a deep spiritual meaning in ancient Egypt; it was not the end, but a new beginning. Due to this, the ancient Egyptians had a wide range of funerary beliefs and practices that were thought to help usher the deceased safely to the afterlife. One god who was believed to assist with the transition from the realm of the living to the land of the dead was the jackal god Anubis.

Anubis held several specialized roles critical to the afterlife journey. He was seen as the protector of the body, overseer of the embalming process, and a judge and giver of life in the hereafter. Visual depictions of Anubis deepen our understanding of his cultural and religious role. The imagery of Anubis, found in tombs of pharaohs and elites, depicts the god as a humanoid figure with reddish or black skin and a jackal head. He may wield a knife, scale, or *ankh* depending on the context of the piece and the role he is performing.

One of Anubis' most notable duties was his oversight of the embalming process. Embalming played a significant role in preserving the human body for the individual to be remade in the afterlife as they were in life. Anubis acts as an observer and guide for embalmers and priests throughout this practice as *jmy w*, or "He who is in the place of embalming".¹ These priests responsible for embalming the body of the deceased may have even worn jackal-headed masks to identify as Anubis and receive his power as a god.²

Another way of harnessing Anubis's power and protection was through amulets of the god's likeness. In the *Pyramid Texts*, spells used to help the king reach the afterlife, Utterance 217 states that the king wore Anubis in the afterlife to assume his role and "reckon hearts"—that is, determine who will live and die.³ Many funerary amulets like the one found in the Art Museum of the University of Memphis further illustrate the idea that Anubis amulets were used as a form of protection for the dead. Amulets of the jackal-headed god, such as those also seen at The Met or The British Museum⁴, showcase that, across hundreds of years, the god's image was used to invoke protection for rebirth.

The duties carried out by the ancient Egyptian god Anubis display the importance the ancient Egyptians placed upon properly preserving and protecting the deceased. Anubis's role as the embalmer and protector of the dead gave funerary practitioners assurance as they wove spells into the wrappings, imbuing them with the power and protection of rebirth. Anubis amulets placed alongside other potent symbols offered additional protection as the deceased started their journey. Anubis's role as a judge and guardian of the gateway to the necropolis and the afterlife further serves as testament to his power; having his support ensured the deceased individual a pathway to eternal paradise.

¹ Arnaud Quertinmont, "A Particular Depiction of Anubis from the Tomb of the Sculptor Nakhtamun (TT 335): Is Anubis a Demon?," *Demon Things: Ancient Egyptian Manifestations of Liminal Entities* (= *Journal of Ancient Egyptian Interconnections*) 25 (2020): 161.

² Dušan Magdolen, "Some Notes on an Epithet of Anubis from the Ancient Egyptian Coffin of Merneby in Bratislava," *Asian and African Studies* 30, no. 2 (2021): 454, <https://doi.org/10.31577/aassav.2021.30.2.07>.

³ Harco Willems, "Anubis as a Judge," in *Egyptian Religion: The Last Thousand Years. Studies Dedicated to the Memory of Jan Quaegebeur: Part I*, ed. Antoon Schoors Harco Willems Clarysse (Leuven, Belgium: Peeters, 1998), 738.

⁴ The Met, "Anubis Amulet" (The Met, n.d.), <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/548208>; The British Museum, "Amulet; Pendant" (The British Museum, n.d.), https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/G_1894-1101-697?selectedImageId=1614026614.

Further Reading!

- Andrews, Carol. *Amulets of Ancient Egypt*. London, England: British Museum Press, 1994.
- Aziz, Sofia. "Vital Organs: A Re-Evaluation of Ancient Egyptian Mummification." *NILE Magazine*, 2024.
- Faulkner, R. O. *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts*. Liverpool, England: Aris & Phillips, 2004.
- Magdolen, Dušan. "Some Notes on an Epithet of Anubis from the Ancient Egyptian Coffin of Merneptah in Bratislava." *Asian and African Studies* 30, no. 2 (2021): 451–61.
<https://doi.org/10.31577/aassav.2021.30.2.07>
- Newell, Charlotte. "The Significance of Anubis as Seen in the Coffin Texts." Macquarie University, 2014.
- Quertinmont, Arnaud. "A Particular Depiction of Anubis from the Tomb of the Sculptor Nakhtamun (TT 335): Is Anubis a Demon?" *Demon Things: Ancient Egyptian Manifestations of Liminal Entities* (= *Journal of Ancient Egyptian Interconnections*) 25 (2020): 159–68.
- Rosicrucian Egyptian Museum. "Anubis." [Egyptianmuseum.org](https://egyptianmuseum.org). Accessed March 26, 2025.
<https://egyptianmuseum.org/deities-Anubis>
- The British Museum. "Amulet; Pendant." The British Museum, n.d.
https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/G_1894-1101-697?selectedImageId=1614026614
- The Met. "Anubis Amulet." The Met, n.d. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/548208>
- Theodor, Abt, and Erik Hornung, eds. *Egyptian Book of Gates*. Translated by Erik Hornung. Zürich, Switzerland: Living Human Heritage Publications Professor Dr. Theodor Abt, 2023.
- Tristant, Yann, and Ellen M. Ryan, eds. *Death Is Only The Beginning: Egyptian Funerary Customs at The Museum of Ancient Cultures Macquarie University*. Australian Centre for Egyptology, 2017.
- Willems, Harco. "Anubis as a Judge." In *Egyptian Religion: The Last Thousand Years. Studies Dedicated to the Memory of Jan Quaegebeur: Part I*, edited by Antoon Schoors Harco Willems Clarysse, 719–43. Leuven, Belgium: Peeters, 1998.