

OF SHOES *and*
DAGGERS
JEWELLERY AS PROTECTION



Jewellery is often prized for its beauty, but to many, it also provides protection from the world's malevolent forces, its very shape imbued with power.

WRITTEN AND PHOTOGRAPHED

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Besides being an object of beauty, for centuries jewellery has carried another very important meaning: worn close to the body, it becomes an extremely personal possession, and has doubled as a means of protection for the wearer since the first beads were produced in prehistoric times. Egypt's traditional jewellery contains a wide variety of amuletic shapes, forms and purposes to keep the wearer safe from malevolent influences; to delve into its mysterious and beautiful world is to encounter a realm saturated by the supernatural, where everyday objects are no longer as they appear, but come laced with meaning, where every colour has significance, and every shape - from hands to turtles, to shoes and daggers - possesses exceptional power.

BLUES AND PASSION

One of the many ways in which jewellery can weave its protective charm around the wearer is by the choice of colours. Throughout history, many protective properties have been attributed to certain colours, with those most often used to ward off evil being red and blue, both in the distant past and in more recent times. Red is the colour of danger, as well as of passion and love, while blue is associated with the sky, water and the eye; most eye beads are made in various shades of blue, which is their most prominent colour. The use of colour sometimes supersedes the use of material in importance, which can lead to the, at first glance, surprising combination of costly coral and carnelian beads with simpler glass and even plastic beads; in these cases, the most important factor is usually the colour of the beads used in the piece, rather than the material.

Rectangular amulet with a depiction of a fish and a small hand.



(Above) Pendant from the south of Egypt. The use of red in this pendant helps to ward off evil. (Opposite) *Zu'ra* amulets, designed to protect small boys and girls.

In southern Egypt, and even further into Sudan, red is the preferred colour of jewellery, while in northern regions blue predominates. This division is not a hard rule, but is reflected in adjacent cultures as well. For example, a predilection for the use of red is found along the Red Sea coast of both Egypt and Sudan, as well as in Yemen, while the preferential use of turquoise and other blues expands well into Palestine, Syria, Jordan and Saudi Arabia.

EYES, HANDS, SHOES AND TURTLES

The most common symbol used to keep the evil eye at bay is a representation of the eye itself. The eye has been used as an amulet since Pharaonic times and has been represented in many shapes and forms in jewellery. The use of eye beads to ward off the evil eye is widespread throughout the Middle East, but it is also effectively averted by the use of mirrors or mirror-like surfaces in jewellery; it is generally believed that the evil eye flees in terror when confronted by its own reflection. The use of the hand as a protective amulet is also found widely throughout the Middle East. Because of its five fingers, the hand is a very strong symbol: the number five is regarded as one of the most powerful numbers, symbolizing man in

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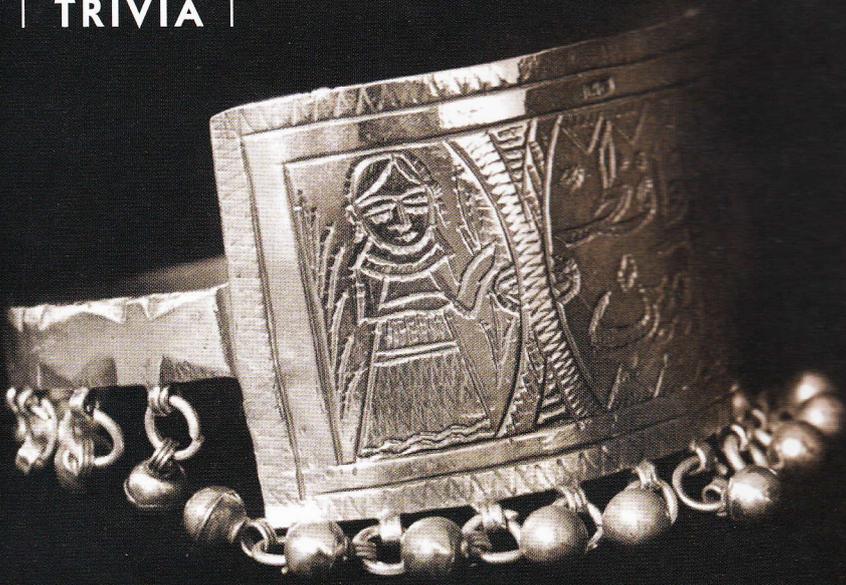
the centre of the universe and referring to the five pillars of Islam, as well as the five daily prayers. Although images of both the eye and the hand do occur in Egypt, they are not as widespread as, for example, the hand in Berber jewellery of the Maghreb or the eye in Syria and Palestine.

Egyptian jewellery makes use of other protective symbols as well, forms that are typical of Egypt and are not found elsewhere. One of the more remarkable Egyptian amulets is the bath clog or shoe, used as a pendant in necklaces or pinned to clothing. Larger amulets in the shape of footwear were also used by shopkeepers to keep the evil eye away from their businesses. The use of shoes and slippers in jewellery has diminished sharply, although their use as amulets has not: actual small shoes may sometimes still be seen tied to car exhausts. Among other motifs found in Egyptian jewellery is the scorpion, which was frequently employed as a beaded amulet in the previous century to ward off the danger of scorpion stings. Images of fish are often used either as a fertility symbol or as a reference to the southern *zar*-spirit, Sitt Safina. A specific type of bracelet made in Cairo for the Palestinian market displays seven stylized turtles, bringing the wearer fertility and health.

AMULET CONTAINERS

Throughout the Nile Valley, amulet containers were worn as a personal adornment. Originally, these took the form of leather pouches, in which written charms were worn, but containers made of silver, and in square, cylindrical or triangular shapes, slowly became popular, and were worn as part of necklaces or on head-veils, or sewn onto garments and face-veils. Notably, most of these containers could not be opened and did not contain any charms because the shape of the container itself was believed to be powerful enough to invoke protection. These amulet containers were elaborately decorated and as such formed true jewels in themselves.





Images usually found on *zar* amulets depicted on armbands from Upper Egypt.



Rectangular amulet container from southern Egypt, decorated with geometrical motifs.



Bahariya disc pendant



Bracelets made in Cairo for the Palestine market, depicting seven stylized turtles.

Through looking at the decoration of the amulet containers, a rough division can be made between various regions in the Nile Valley. In the south, a variety of geometrical patterns is found, whereas in the north floral motifs are preferred. This division is also reflected in the way the *galagil* - bells dangling from amulets - are constructed. The south has, in keeping with Yemeni and Sudanese jewellery traditions, bells constructed from two separate elements, with the division horizontally in the middle, whereas *galagil* in the north are generally made of one piece of sheet silver folded with a vertical division. The number of *galagil* attached to an amulet container, or in fact to any other type of jewellery, is usually an uneven number, and in this way, is also a form of protection in itself. The dangling bells are an important part of a piece of jewellery's apotropaic power: their shiny surfaces, their jingling sound, their sudden unpredictable movements and their uneven number all confuse evil, causing it to turn away from the wearer.

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BAHARIYA AMULETS

One of the most interesting forms of regional jewellery, also doubling as amulets, are the discs worn by women in Bahariya Oasis up until the 1960s. These discs were made of metal, not of silver, and measured roughly between 6 and 11cm in diameter. They were decorated with peculiar depictions of anthropological or architectural figures and plants on one side, and adorned with *galagil* on the lower side. They are unique to the oasis, and have been compared to *zar* amulets or Nubian coin imitations in an attempt to explain their very specific decorative patterns, but to no avail. As it is known that these discs were produced by two Coptic jewellery-makers, I would suggest that their decoration is actually derived from Coptic sources. Only these two Copts made the discs: when one of them passed away, the other moved to Cairo and their production ceased. The discs' decoration also bears more than a passing resemblance to illustrations in Coptic magical papyri; how these sometimes centuries-old illustrations came to be used on women's jewellery in Bahariya Oasis remains one of the more interesting questions in my jewellery research.

DAGGERS AND CHILDREN

Children and new mothers are the most vulnerable of human beings. Traditional folk belief would have it that a dangerous



Cylindrical amulet container from Cairo, decorated with floral motifs. These were called *higab khiyari* for their resemblance to cucumbers. The vertical division in the *galagil* also places it in northern Egypt.

and jealous female twin spirit, the *qarina*, was intent on harming pregnant women and newborn babies; consequently, to protect themselves and their babies against this spirit, women used special types of jewellery. Pregnant women, for example, would wear amulets in the shape of swords or daggers; the choice of these rather unfeminine attributes may be explained by the widely held belief that demons and evil spirits of all sorts could be warded off by iron. The depiction of iron daggers, knives and swords reflected the properties of the depicted weapon and in this way the image in itself was strong enough to keep the *qarina* at bay. Newborn children were adorned with *zu'ra* amulets, relatively simple creations of silver wire, decorated with *galagil*; those worn by boys were pear-shaped, while girls wore a ring-shaped version. If silver was unavailable, the new mother would simply create a beaded amulet. As girls would eventually turn into mothers themselves, they were believed to remain vulnerable to the ill will of the *qarina* throughout their lives; as a result, the origin of many of the elaborate jewellery pieces traditionally worn by Egyptian women can be traced back to the shape of the protective *zu'ra* amulet, although the original meaning may have been lost.

Traditional Egyptian jewellery has many layers. It not only adorns a woman, but also indicates her social position, status and wealth. In the choice of materials, colours and decorations, it also reveals her hopes and fears. The joy of being a bride, and the fear of illnesses or harm to her children are shared by women across the globe; it is these emotions, rendered in beads and silver, that transform traditional jewellery into an endearing and personal heritage. ♦