

Hypocephalus in Ancient Egyptian Religion

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Abstract

A hypocephalus is a small round disk-shaped object generally made of stuccoed linen, but also of papyrus, bronze, gold, wood, or clay, which ancient Egyptians from the Late Period on placed it under the heads of their dead.

This odd disk, covered with strange images and texts, is known as "Hypocephalus," which is a Greek word for "That which is below the head," in reference to the object's funerary function. This unusual religious pillow enabled the deceased to identify himself to the sun god by light it created.

It was believed to magically protect the deceased, cause the head and body to be enveloped in light and warmth, making the deceased divine. It replaced the earlier cow-amulet.

The incantation on the disk, featuring mysterious forms of the creator god, provided the deceased with protection in the shadows of the afterlife. It was often inscribed with chapter 162 of the 'Book of the Dead' which is the chapter of giving warmth under the head of the glorified one.

The current study was undertaken to spot light on the etymology of the word hypocephalus. To shed light on the symbolism of the hypocephalus amulet. To focus on the place of putting Hypocephalus in the tomb. To explain the inscriptions depicted on both sides of the Hypocephalus. To describe the scenes carved on Hypocephalus.

The preliminary results revealed that the Hypocephalus, literally 'that which is below the head', was placed between the head of the mummy and the funerary headrest. The earliest examples appeared in the Late Period, around 664 BC. They were simply inscribed pieces of papyrus, mounted on cartonnage disks. By the Ptolemaic period (332-30 BC), they were made of linen stiffened with plaster, decorated with vignettes. The hieroglyphic inscription runs around the circumference of the disk.

Key Words

Hypocephalus, Round Disk, Head Pillow, Late Period, Amulet, Ancient Egyptian Religion, Book of the Dead, Ptolemaic Period