

Objects and Concepts

19-20th January, 2023

Conference organized by the HEFS Ancient Egyptian Committee in partnership with the HNM
Simmelweis Museum for Medical History

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Abstract

The curious history of Tutankhamun's scarab

For the modern era the so-called Libyan Glass Area, located approximately 700 km from the Nile Valley in the Great Sand Sea of the Egyptian Western Desert, was discovered in 1846 and was first mentioned by the French Consul of Jeddah, Fulgence Fresnel, in his memoirs. Yet, the actual scientific discovery of the area waited until 1932.

The formation of the Libyan glass, numerous pieces of which can as yet be found scattered all over the surface of the desert sand in the Glass Area, is still under discussion. There are several theories, among which the most widely accepted is that the formation of this unique natural glass surface in an area of at least 2.500 km² large may possibly have been due to a partial meteorite impact that happened approximately about 30 million years ago.

In the recent decades, scientific expeditions in the area not only investigated the geological composition and the conditions of the formation of the glass surface, but also found traces of Neolithic use of some glass pieces in the form of chipped stone tools and axes. Curiously enough, a scarab made of this strange greenish-yellow translucent stone also occupied a prominent place in one of Tutankhamun's pectorals found by Howard Carter in the "Treasury" of the royal tomb in 1922. The motifs of the pectoral represent a complex symbolism related to the movement of the sun and moon. The material of the scarab had been thought to be chalcedony until 1998 when gemmological analyses proved that it was made of a rare Libyan glass scrap collected solely from the Great Sand Sea deposit in the far corner of the Egyptian Western Desert.

In my presentation, I will examine the circumstances of how and when the natural glass scrap that made up Tutankhamun's scarab could have ended up in the Nile Valley.



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