

**Gold Shell Amulet in with the Name of Senwosret I
The British Museum**

From Egypt
12th Dynasty, 1965-1920 BC

A symbolic play on words



This oyster shell amulet is of a type which became very popular during the Middle Kingdom (about 2040-1750 BC). Although it was often depicted being worn by women, and has been found among women's jewellery, this example is decorated in filigree with the name of Senwosret I (reigned 1965-1920 BC).

Shell amulets were thought to promote health, through the similar sound of the word for shell and the word meaning 'sound, healthy'. Another amulet with the same play on words was the papyrus column, which symbolized rebirth and regeneration. The oyster shell amulet is usually made of gold, silver or electrum (a naturally occurring alloy of gold and silver). Gold symbolized the gods' everlasting flesh, while their bones were thought to be made of silver. These metals are also linked to the sun and the moon.

Shells were used as jewellery from the earliest times. These were often cowrie shells, bored and strung either alone or with beads of other materials. Shell necklaces have been found in the poorest of graves at Predynastic sites such as Hierakonpolis, where the only other grave goods were pottery vessels.

E.R. Russmann, *Eternal Egypt: masterworks of* (University of California Press, 2001)

C.A.R. Andrews, *Catalogue of Egyptian antiquities* (London, The British Museum Press, 1981)

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