

The book of the dead explained with vignettes and hieroglyphics

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The Book of the Dead

The Book of the Dead is an Egyptian funerary text which contains information which is intended to aid in the journey of the departed through the underworld. This information takes the form of vignettes and hieroglyphics (Mark). Some vignettes also contain scenes from the life of the deceased, as each Book of the Dead is commissioned for a specific person rather than there being a standard version of this text (Carelli). The artifact appears to be a large, thin, sheet of brown material which contains writing in black ink, and drawn figures which are separated from the text with straight, thin, black lines. There appears to be a narrative aspect, which includes scenes from the underworld and the deceased individual's travel through it (Carelli). This version of the Book of the Dead was created in 300's-200's BCE by an unknown artist in Egypt for the aid of Nes-Min on his journey through the afterlife (object label). The medium of this artifact is Ink on papyrus (object label). Papyrus was made in Egypt by separating the outside of the plant from the inside, and slicing the inside into thin strips (How Egyptian Papyrus Paper Is Made). This artifact resides at the Detroit Institute of Arts.

The Book of the Dead's practical function was that of a religious text. The vignettes depicted reflect the religious beliefs that the ancient Egyptian held, particularly in regards to the afterlife, gods, and the power of spoken and written spells and magic (Mark). While the preservation of the mummy embodies a preservation of the physical form, The Book of the Dead similarly strives for continuation of the spirit in the afterlife. Outside of ancient

Egyptian religion, there wasn't anything that The Book of the Dead was "used" for, outside of being a decoration or adornment in the dead person's chamber.

I find it interesting that the Egyptian's fear of death went beyond that of the physical. That there can be an absolute death, but this death can occur only beyond the grave (Carelli). The Book of the Dead contains spells which can alter the outcome of the Weighing of the Heart ceremony, which is the ultimate moral test in the afterlife (Carelli). Even if the dead do not live a perfect life, and are not honest in their oath that they have not committed any of the 42 sins, they may pass the Weighing of the Heart, saving their heart from being devoured by Ammit (Carelli). This implies that the Egyptian religion was not one of moral absolutes. The knowledge of this book can, in effect, trump the virtue of one's life as exemplified through the Weighing of the Heart ceremony. The Book of the Dead is also a symbol of social status, as only the religious elite, political elite, and wealthy received or could afford burials ornate enough to include The Book of the Dead (Carelli). This particular book of the dead was made for Nes-Min, who was a priest in his life (Nesmin, The Belgrade mummy).

At the DIA, people seemed relatively uninterested in this particular artifact. This disinterest may not be due to the artifact itself, but because it is located in small room which also boasts a full mummy and numerous statues and figurines. When one imagines words associated with ancient Egypt, "mummies" and "pyramids" are among the first that come to mind. This may influence the artifacts that first catch their eye in an exhibit. This, in

combination with the morbid curiosity that many feel towards the mummy which contains actual human remains, may have resulted in The Book of the Dead receiving relatively little attention. Although the group around this artifact was sparse, The Book of the Dead exhibit was not barren, and those who did take a look took the time to read the plaque. Those who looked at this exhibit didn't seem to experience strong emotion, but were serious and clinical in their gaze. This could be a result of the morbid nature of the artifact.

I was attracted to this object because it seemed to offer a token of insight into the way a particular culture sees death and mortality. Mortality is a concept which every culture and religion must contend with. Because of this, I feel it is a sort of common denominator which is useful when attempting to gain insight into different ways of life and cultural beliefs. This train of thought is what first attracted me to this particular artifact.