

Book of the Dead: Information Pack

Overview

Part of a tradition of funerary texts, produced to help the deceased in their journey to the afterlife. Its original title in Egyptian is 'Book of Coming Forth by Day'. Written on a papyrus roll (not a 'book' in the modern understanding of the word), it is made up of text (hieroglyphs or hieratic*) and images.



Guide to the Afterlife

The Book of the Dead is made up of a series of spells, but no two books are the same – the owner could select from a large number. In total, almost 200 spells are known. Some of these give the deceased knowledge, some protect him from dangers on the journey, others make sure the body regains its power of movement and speech. The longest known Book is 40 m long, but some are only 1 m long – longer rolls were expensive and so only the wealthiest could afford to have them produced.

Two Key Scenes in Close-Up

Opening of the Mouth ceremony (above):

- Ritual taking place once the mummy reaches the tomb;
- Mouth opened by an adze (tool) by priests, with rituals said by the priest in charge, who wears leopard skin ;
- Allows the deceased to verbally defend himself/herself at the judgement of the dead.

Weighing of the heart (below):

- Anubis* leads the deceased to the Hall of Justice, before the judgement of Osiris*, denying having ever committed any crimes during their life;
- Scales are erected, weighing the heart of the deceased against the feather of Ma'at*;
- The god Thoth* records the outcome, the devourer (Ammit*) stands by, ready to eat the heart of anyone who fails.



Glossary

Ammit: Also known as 'The Devourer', a monster with the features of a crocodile, hippo, and lion – the most dangerous animals known to the Egyptians.

Anubis: A jackal-headed god associated with the deceased and cemeteries, who helps the dead in the journey to the afterlife. Sometimes called The Embalmer.

Hieratic: A cursive form of Egyptian writing, mainly used on papyrus.

Ma'at: A goddess shown either as a woman with a feather in her hair or just as a feather. She represents truth and order.

Osiris: The king of the dead, and a dead god. Osiris is shown as a mummy holding symbols of kingship and wearing the crown of Egypt.

Thoth: An ibis-headed god, sometimes also associated with baboons. He is a god of knowledge, wisdom, and writing, and can be shown as a scribe.

Tips and Notes

Spells:

Magic (Egyptian *heka*) was an important part of life – and death – and either reading text aloud or showing something (in painting or as a model) would make it become reality.

Scenes in the Book of the Dead:

Even though they're not divided up, the scenes (or vignettes) read like comic books, showing a series of episodes, moving from left-to-right. Not all scenes are coloured – some are just outlined (e.g., below).

Examples of Books of the Dead in UK Museums

British Museum: Book of Ani, ca. 1200 BC:

https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=114905&partId=1&place=35461&plaA=35461-3-1&page=1

Liverpool World Museum: Book of Djed-Hor (right), ca. 300 BC:

<http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/wml/collections/antiquities/ancient-egypt/item-295406.aspx>

John Rylands Library, Manchester: Book of Padiusir, ca. 300 BC:

see, e.g., <https://egyptmanchester.wordpress.com/tag/book-of-the-dead/>



Possible Points for Exploration

Egyptian Mythology

The Book of the Dead depicts many gods and goddesses, both well-known and obscure. Myths involving Osiris and his wife-sister Isis and their sister Nephthys (both left) are vital to understanding Egyptian life.

Priests

Priests embalm the dead and perform the funerary rituals, e.g., Opening of the Mouth. They were fundamental in Egyptian society, both in religion (in temples) but also landowning and the economy (like churches in the modern world).

Writing

From scribes writing the papyrus to Thoth recording outcomes of rituals, writing is very important. Topics of script (hieroglyphs), papyrus as ancient paper / books, and the role of scribes/writers can all be explored.