

Egyptian funerary papyrus (reproduction of the Book of the Dead of Hunefer)

Our reproduction is based on a scene from the funerary papyrus (also known as the Book of the Dead) of an Egyptian official named Hunefer.



(Image source: Wikipedia. Original is in the British Museum, London.)

History

The Book of the Dead is a compilation of hieroglyphic spells and images, designed to protect and support the passage of a person to the afterlife and their continued existence there. These papyri would be placed in the tomb, along with other offerings. “Book of the Dead” papyri are first found in the early New Kingdom, around 1450 BCE. The practice of including these papyri with the dead was popular for 1500 years! The last “Books of the Dead” are dated to the 1st century BCE. The finest examples of these, like Hunefer’s, were written by expert scribes and decorated by master draftsmen. The labor and materials to make these was very expensive.

Hunefer’s original papyrus dates from the New Kingdom, around 1310-1210 BCE. The excellent quality of Hunefer’s papyrus reflects the high status he held in life. Hunefer was an Egyptian official who worked as a scribe, steward, and overseer for Pharaoh Sety I. The location of his tomb is unknown, though some scholars believe he was buried near Memphis. (Our copy is from the 20th century.)

Description

Captured in this papyrus are three scenes with various spells, connected to Hunefer completing a test called “The Weighing of the Heart.” The scenes read from left to right.

In the first scene, at the top, Hunefer testifies to the good life he has led and thanks those deities who supported his judgement before Osiris, helping him gain immortal existence in the afterworld (the deities are named as Ra, Atum, Shu, Tefnut, Geb, Nut, Horus, Isis, Nephthys, Hu and Sia, and the Southern, Northern and Western 'roads').



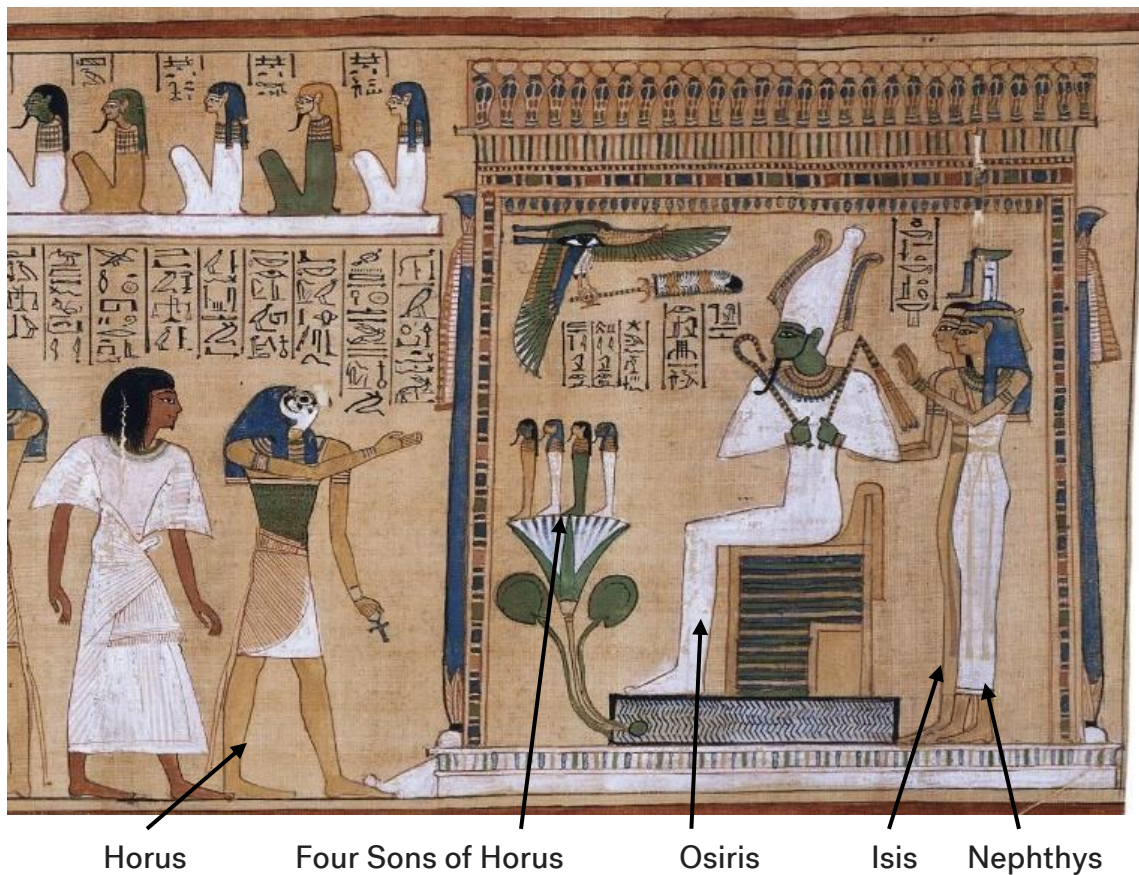
On the bottom left, you see the jackal-headed Anubis, the god who guides people to the afterworld. He brings Hunefer into the judgement area for the weighing of Hunefer's heart. To the ancient Egyptians, the heart represented the spiritual essence of a person, and as such, retained a record of their actions in life. Anubis also supervises the judgement scales. Hunefer's heart, represented as a small pot, is weighed against a feather, the symbol of Ma'at, the goddess of truth and justice. If his heart is heavier than Ma'at's feather, then he would be condemned to non-existence and consumption by Ammit, the fearsome "devourer," shown here as part-crocodile, part-lion, and part-hippopotamus. Luckily for Hunefer, he lived a life without too much sin, so his heart weighed less than the feather! The scribe noting Hunefer's "score" on his test is the god Thoth, shown with an ibis head. Notice the **ankh** held in Anubis' left hand and perched on the knees of some of the gods in the scene above. The ankh is a symbol for eternal life and is often seen repeated in funerary texts.



Anubis Hunefer's Heart Ammit Feather (Ma'at) Thoth

After having passed the weighing of his heart, Hunefer is brought into the presence of Osiris, god of the dead and afterworld. The falcon-headed Horus, son of Osiris and Isis, accompanies Hunefer. Horus holds an ankh in his left hand as he presents Hunefer to Osiris. Osiris passes final judgment on Hunefer, allowing him to enter the afterworld. Hunefer is referred to as having become “true of voice” or “justified.” This was a standard epithet applied to dead individuals in their texts.

Osiris is enthroned as a king under a canopy, with his sisters Isis and Nephthys behind him. (Isis is on the left, and Nephthys is on the right.) He is shown in mummified form, wears the **atef** (feathered white crown) and a braided false beard, and holds the crook and flail. Below his throne is a representation of the water of the Nile (zigzags symbolize water), from which grows a lotus, symbol of rebirth and fertility. Perched on the top of the lotus are the four sons of Horus, representing cardinal directions and the canopic jars that would have held the organs of Hunefer (stomach, intestines, liver, and lungs). Above them, we again see Horus, but this time in the form of the **udjat** (or wedjat) eye and holding an ostrich feather, another symbol for eternal life.



Materials

Our example and the original were made from papyrus. Papyrus is a reedy plant that grows along the banks of the Nile. During the time of Hunefer, Egyptians also grew papyrus in plantations to process for writing material.

Early descriptions by Romans of the papyrus-making process along with modern experiments in papyrus-making and analysis of historical samples have led to strong conclusions about how the ancient Egyptians produced their papyrus.

After gathering the plants while the stalks were still green, the outer rind of the plant was shaved off, and the inner part or pith of the stalk were very thinly sliced into strips. These strips then were laid out in two layers; first in a vertical layer, then in a horizontal layer. No adhesive was used as the plant strips were sticky. The papyrus sheet would be pressed and dried (though the exact method of pressing and drying by the Egyptians is unknown), and then these sheets of papyrus were made into rolls. A common size is twenty sheets to a roll. The sheet edges overlapped by 1–2 centimeters and were adhered together with some type of starchy paste.

When papyri were rolled up, the vertical-running strips were on the outside because of the tendency of the sheet to curve in that direction. Any illustrations and inscriptions were generally on the horizontal side of the papyrus sheet, where they would be protected when rolled up.

Scribes wrote the text in black and/or red ink. The black ink is thought to have been made from soot (carbon). The red ink is either red iron-oxide or red ocher. As for the varied colors of the paint on the illustrations, these were mineral-based pigments. White was made of calcium carbonate or calcium sulfate; blue, a copper silicate which is the earliest synthetic pigment, called Egyptian blue; green, often another silicate called green frit, similar to Egyptian blue, or copper chloride-based green pigment; yellow, either yellow ocher or orpiment; red, occasionally a more orange-red pigment called realgar in addition to the iron-oxide or ocher reds; and various iron-oxide or ocher browns. Samples that have been analyzed indicate that the most common binder in the paint was acacia gum.

Scholars believe that a scribe's brush was made from a rush (reedy plant), with its tip chewed to separate it into fibers.

Sources

Book of the Dead of Hunefer. [British Museum collection, EA9901.3](#).

Booklet: *Art Adventure: Egypt's Sunken Cities*.

British Museum. Hunefer, Book of the Dead: <https://smarthistory.org/hunefer-book-of-the-dead/>

Burkhard Backes, *Egyptian Book of the Dead* (includes a bibliography of resources), [Oxford Bibliographies](#).

Cartonnage and Coffin of Lady Tashat, <https://artstories.artsmia.org/#/o/97>

[How Ancient Papyrus Was Made](#), University of Michigan Library.

Khan Academy, [Last Judgment of Hunefer](#) (short video).

Rebecca Capua, [Papyrus-Making in Egypt](#), Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Also see the information sheet on hieroglyphs.

Sunken Cities Connections

Various representations of Osiris, Isis, and Horus are found throughout the exhibition. Following are some of the key works that have connections.

Osiris and Isis Seated, 570-526 BCE, greywacke, satin polish (H. 89 cm and 90cm).

The greywacke sculpture of Osiris enthroned is a three-dimensional representation of the depiction of Osiris in the papyrus. The sculpture includes the **atef** (feathered crown), crook and flail, and mummified form.

In the sculpture of Isis, she holds an ankh in her right hand.

Statue of Horus Protecting Pharaoh, c. 350 BCE. Limestone and glass (H. 55 cm).

The statue of Horus shows him in a protective role, in full falcon form.

Pectoral, 943-922 BCE. Gold, lapis lazuli, glass paste (H. 37.5 cm, W. 19 cm, Th. 1.2 cm).

On the pectoral, Isis and Nephthys are shown with spread wings, facing the center medallion which represents the sun. Much as they stand behind Osiris as protection in our papyrus, here they protect the sun as it journeys across the night sky before rising again. Inside the medallion, Amun-Ra, god of the sun, sits enthroned. He holds an ankh. Facing him is the goddess Ma'at, responsible for keeping the world in harmony.

Connections to Collection

Cartonnage of Lady Tashat | Ancient Egyptian | 945-712 BCE | 16.414

<https://collections.artsmia.org/art/95/cartonnage-of-lady-tashat-ancient-egyptian>

The cartonnage shows scenes including Osiris, Anubis, and Horus's eye (the udjat, located at the base of the cartonnage). The four sons of Horus are also present, lined up beneath the winged sun symbol below Tashat's face. The painted cartonnage functions much the same as the book of the dead. From the label: "The inscriptions are prayers to the gods for offerings of food and clothing in the afterlife, while the paintings are full of complex religious motifs focusing on divine protection of the deceased and resurrection in the afterlife."

Thoth | Greco-Egyptian | 305-30 BCE | 29.17.613

<https://collections.artsmia.org/art/372/thoth-ancient-egyptian>

Thoth was god of the sciences, math, and knowledge. This small bronze statuette shows him with the ibis-head, as seen in our papyrus.

God Osiris | Ancient Egyptian | 644-30 BCE | 16.40

<https://collections.artsmia.org/art/93/god-osiris-ancient-egyptian>

This small bronze of a standing Osiris has a mummified form. Osiris wears the atef crown and false beard, and he holds the crook and flail.