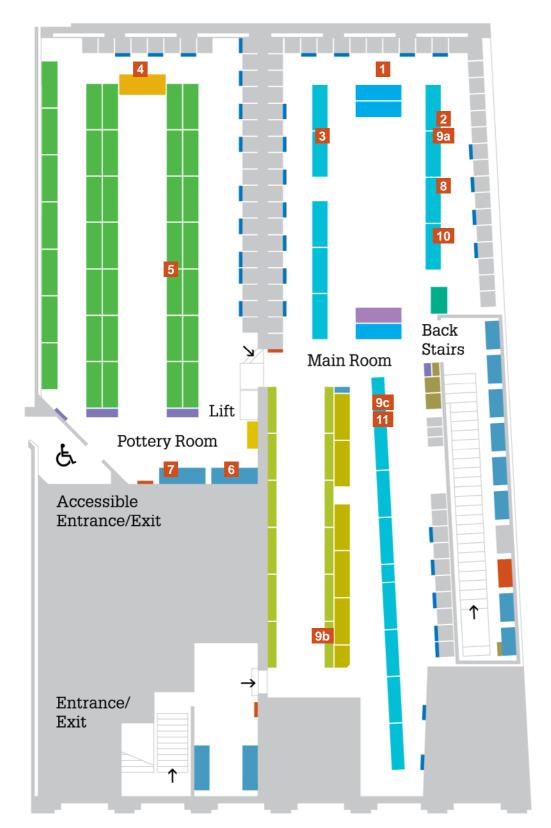
Trails

Gothic Egypt

By Debbie Challis





1

Wooden Coffin of Nairytisitnefer (UC14230)

2

Head of a Woman, Roman Period (UC28073)

3

Blue faience ring withan wedjat-eye (UC1005)

4

Book of the Dead fragment – judgement scene (UC32444)

5

Red ware pot inscribed with a spell (UC16128)

6

Wooden painted shabti figure of Meh (UC8824)

7

Sir Flinders Petrie by Philip de Laszlo (1934).

8

Bronze aegis of Isis (UC30479)

9a

Faience ankh from Meroe in Sudan (UC43949)

9b

King carrying an ankh on slab from Koptos

9с

Wooden ankhs, possibily from a mummification table

10

Faience wedjat eye (UC29866)

11

Kohl pots (UC26200, 26199, 26203)

Gothic writing signifies a culture of excess.

Fred Botting, *Gothic* (1996)

Google Gothic Egypt and you get the website 'Gothic Martha Stewart: DIY Home décor for the morbidly inclined'. The look is described:

Anne Rice surely wasn't the first to link traditional gothic to the intriguing mysteries of Egypt. The ankh has long been a gothfavorite, and the dark tombs of pharaohs somehow seem suited to the gothic temperament.

www.trystancraft.com/martha/motifs/egyptian.html [accessed 20/10/2010]

There is more to Gothic Egypt than soft furnishings. Numerous mummy stories from the mid nineteenth century are testament to this. These horror stories culminate in the baroque gothic of Bram Stoker, Arthur Conan Doyle and H. Rider Haggard (among others) at the turn of the twentieth century. Although there are some modern literary successors such as Anne Rice, Gothic Egypt is mostly on screen, while emblems of Ancient Egypt have been reused in Goth subculture.

Gothic Egypt is an attitude to Egypt. An image of Ancient (and Modern) Egypt based on ideas of decay, an obsession with death, a civilization alien to Western cultural norms. Egypt is related to and yet lies outside the 'West' and has been perceived as typifying Oriental excess. Gothic draws on an excess intertwined with ideas of the past:

Gothic atmospheres – gloomy and mysterious – have repeatedly signalled the disturbing return of pasts upon presents and evoked emotions of terror and laughter.

Fred Botting, Gothic (1996), 1

It is no accident that Gothic Egypt uses museums or rooms full of Egyptian objects as an atmospheric backdrop for horror. Arguably this museum is particularly 'gothic', since its display feels arcane compared to modern museums; exuding a turn of the century feel (though it has only been here since the 1950s).

Gothic terror draws on loss and the overturning of social conventions. The blurring of boundaries between past and present, and the relationship between science and superstition are crucial to Gothic Egypt narratives.

Preserving Death and Life

1 Wooden Coffin of Nairytisitnefer (UC14230).

This coffin once contained the mummified body of a woman called Nairytisitnefer. She came from a rich priestly family at Thebes, and died in about 700 BC. The coffin is covered with images and prayers from the so-called 'Book of the Dead' intended to bring about her rebirth in the afterlife, in a perfect form. This coffin can be said to sum up the traditional image of Ancient Egypt: death, mummification and belief in the afterlife.

The idea that Ancient Egyptian style was appropriate for mausoleums and memorials was fashionable during the nineteenth century. An extreme example of this can be seen in Highgate Cemetery, one of the most famous Victorian 'garden' cemeteries in London. The Egyptian Avenue was added to the Circle of Lebanon Catacombs by James Bunstone Bunning between 1839–1842. The Egyptianising columns, two guardian obelisks and arch evoke a romantic view of Egypt. It is perhaps more romantic and gothic now it is overgrown. It has also become linked to the site of Lucy Westenra's burial and tomb in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (though this is contested).

Photo of the entrance to the Egyptian Avenue, Highgate Cemetery.



Head of a woman from the late Roman period, covered by a sprang (or knitted) cap (UC28073) on bottom shelf of Objects by Site: Hawara.

Margaret Murray, Flinders Petrie's assistant and a lecturer at UCL, unwrapping one of the 'Two Brothers' at the Manchester Museum in 1908. © Manchester Museum



Mummies and mummified remains had been known about for a long time before the nineteenth century. Powdered mummy, or mummia, was an expensive and fashionable ingredient in medicines. It was considered an elixir of life during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The idea of preserving the body after death through the elaborate processes of mummification was different to predominantly Christian beliefs around death and burial. There was an abject fascination with the corpse which fed the popularity of mummy unwrapping, particularly in the 1830s and 1840s, though this practice continued throughout the nineteenth century. With the formation of Egyptian Archaeology as an academic discipline, unwrappings continued in the early twentieth century but were considered to be more fulfilling a scientific purpose (at least by the participants concerned).

Mummies are crucial elements of Egyptian Gothic literature. Most stories from the mid nineteenth century use the idea of a mummy coming back from death to life to create horror and, sometimes, romantic sympathy. In Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *Lot No. 249* (1892) the mummy is merely a horrific weapon with no attributed sensibilities.

When the story's strapping hero Abercrombie Smith peers into a mummy case that moments ago he had seen empty, the grotesque description invokes terror:

Now it framed the lank body of its horrible occupant, who stood, grim and stark, with his black, shrivelled face towards the door. The form was lifeless and inert, but it seemed to Smith as he gazed that there still lingered a lurid spark of vitality which lurked in the depths of the hollow sockets.

On the other hand Edgar Allen Poe creates a more bathetic awakening in *Some Words with a Mummy* (1850), as the mummy winked very rapidly like a pantomime actor, sneezed, sat up and raised his fists at those who had awoken him.

Abject Parts

Is the mummified head somehow more horrific since it is severed from the body and a body part rather than a corpse? Mummified body parts, particularly hands and feet, feature prominently in mummy stories. Theophile Gautier's *The Mummy's Foot* (1840) is about the stolen foot of a beautiful princess and the dreamlike journey the owner of that foot goes on to return the body part to the princess.

Film poster for *Blood* from the *Mummy's Tomb* (1971), the Hammer Horror based on Stoker's *The Jewel of* the Seven Stars.



Later mummy stories are more horrific, playing up the severing of limbs as desecrating the tomb, the body and disturbing death. The discovery of mummies, usually female, in tombs by archaeologists is often depicted as a scene of violation with connotations of sexual violence. The plot of Bram Stoker's *The Jewel of Seven Stars* (1903) revolves around the beautiful mummy of Queen Tera, whose hand was cut off after death so that her body was violated and she could not use her full magic powers. Her hand is invoked as an eerie emblem of potency and the occult:

For, most wonderful of all, across the breast of the mummified Queen lay a hand of seven fingers, ivory white, the wrist only showing a scar like a jagged red line, from which seemed to depend drops of blood.

The fetishistic prominence given to the severed hand and long fingers is increased by the powerful ruby red ring covered in symbols that the princess wears and uses for her magic.

Blue faience ring depicting anwedjat-eye (UC1005) in top shelf of Amarna Case from Dynasty 18.

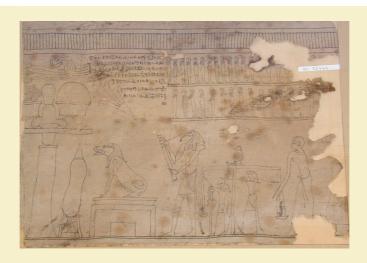
This ring, like the jewel of seven stars, is more than a piece of jewellery. The wedjat, or udjat, eye is a symbol of power and royal protection and was worn to ward off evil. Rings have been given special power and significance in gothic storytelling. Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Ring of Thoth* (1890) is named after the ring that can bring death and peace to a man, who has lived unhappily for thousands of years.

Curse Narrative

Intrinsic to plots involving resurrected mummies is the 'curse narrative', which is either predicated around an event in the past (a violation of a burial) or the violation, or rape' of the tomb by archaeologists in the present (think of, for example, the myths around the curse of Tutankhamen). Sometimes both these curse narratives are used and intertwined. The idea of the vengeful corpse has links to Victorian ghost stories in which the undead or spirits seek revenge at all costs.

Book of the Dead judgement scene on a linen bandage fragment (UC32444) from Dynasty 30 (380–343 BC) or the Ptolemaic period (305–30 BC). In the Writing Case.

Book of the Dead judgement scene (UC32444).



The Book of the Dead is a modern name for Ancient Egyptian manuscripts containing compositions drawn from about 175 individual 'chapters'. These were known to the Ancient Egyptians as the 'Chapters for Coming Forth by Day'. They comprise a collection of hymns, spells and instructions for securing eternal life. The idea of the 'Book of the Dead' as linked to life and death through incantations and magic is key to the curse narrative. The visual images in the Book also play a huge role in the aesthetics of Gothic Egypt.

The incantations, ceremonies and depictions of objects in the Book of the Dead are often reused in gothic tales and films. There is often reference to an imagined document, such as a 'Book of Life', in which, rather than securing passage through to the afterlife, the incantations can be used to bring the body back to life.

Red ware pot inscribed with magic spell to provide water, milk, garment, daylight and food for the deceased (UC16128).

The inscription of spells on inanimate objects, from pots to scarabs to jewellery, is also used in Gothic Egypt. Often the objects themselves, such as a cat mummy or scarabs, become living and horrific vehicles of the mummy's power, or grotesque servants.

Wooden painted shabti figure of Meh inscribed with traditional shabti formula in 8 horizontal bands (UC8824). The shabti formula invokes the shabti figure to stand in for the deceased in manual labour. The spell is already known from the coffin text spell 472, which is found on some mid Twelfth Dynasty coffins from Bersheh (about 1850 BC) and is known as chapter 6 of the Book of the Dead.

Shabtis were buried as servants for the deceased in the afterlife. A feature of some Gothic Egypt narratives is either the use of the mummy as a servant or the resurrected mummy's use of others as servants.

The gothic reading of spells, incantations and curses in the modern era has much more to do with modern conceptions of religion and magic, based more on Christian condemnation of such practices, than Ancient Egyptian religion or worship. Curses were, in particular, linked to occult practice and 'dark' magic.

Science and Superstition

The modern day archaeologist battling against, or being intertwined in, ancient superstition is one of the crucial narrative features of late nineteenth-century Gothic Egypt literature. This feature has also become an important image in more contemporary films and television. Archaeologists and scholars of ancient Egypt are often the main character in a story, such as in *The Ring of Thoth*, if not the hero. In *The Jewel of the Seven Stars*, numerous contemporary archaeologists are mentioned, including Flinders Petrie.

Sir Flinders Petrie by Philip de Laszlo (1934). Petrie is also the namesake of the Watson-like hero and narrator, Dr. Petrie in the first three Fu Manchu novels of Sax Rohmer. It is interesting to note that these novels contain many Egyptian elements with Fu Manchu, throughout, being described as resembling the mummy of Seti I and an implication, in the final novel, *Emperor Fu Manchu* (1959), that the deadly Doctor may, in fact, not be Chinese but, rather, a sorcerer of ancient Egyptian origin.

Scientific study is brought into competition with the world of the paranormal in Gothic Egypt. This had been a facet for years before the discovery of Tutankhamen in 1922. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was convinced that his friend Bertram Fletcher Robinson died of typhoid fever in 1907 due to his study of a female mummy in the British Museum. The Curse of Tutankhamen was born following the death of the expedition's funder, Lord Carnarvon, shortly after the discovery of the tomb.

The curse of the Pharaoh was thought to be upon all those involved in the excavation. This idea was probably originally promulgated by the journalist and sometime Egyptologist, Arthur Weigall and was further fuelled by writers such as Conan Doyle, and even at times by Howard Carter himself. Flinders Petrie thought the whole curse myth was ridiculous and dismissed it as sentimental rubbish. Most of those engaged in the discovery and excavation of the tomb, subsequently lived well into old age and, importantly long after the press had lost interest.

The role of the archaeologist and the scientific study of the past in Gothic Egypt owes more to often untutored assumptions and some ambivalence about the role and position of the colonising West in Egypt. The baroque gothic of turn-of-the-century writing takes place against an imperial backdrop. The British purchased all the shares in the Suez Canal in 1875 and annexed Egypt in 1882 as a somewhat unofficial protectorate of the British Empire. This was followed by the campaign against the Mahdi in Sudan in 1885 and then again in 1898. Racist descriptions of Egyptians (modern and ancient) and Orientalist assumptions are apparent in many Gothic Egypt narratives. On the other hand admiration of Egypt is also clear. The perceived 'difference' of Egypt also appealed to many.

Howard Carter and Egyptian worker with the coffin and body of Tutankhamen (1922)

© Giffith Institute, University of Oxford.



Occult Readings

The Theosophical Society, originally for the study into medium and spiritualistic traditions and practices, was founded in New York in 1875. One of the founding members was Madame Helena Blavatsky who had lived in Cairo in the early 1870s and published the massive *Isis Unveiled: A Master-Key to the Mysteries of Ancient and Modern Science and Theology* in 1877. Blavatsky attributed the ancients, and in particular the Egyptians, with superior knowledge and wisdom and drew on ancient texts as well as current Egyptology. Of particular significance to her was the Book of the Dead as well as the divine figures of Osiris and Isis.

Bronze Aegis of Isis (UC30479) from Dynasty 30 (380–343 BC) or the Ptolemaic period (305–30 BC). In the Temples Case.

Blavatsky was also linked to and influenced the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn which was established in Britain in the 1880s. Bram Stoker's wife Florence and many friends were members. The magical wisdom offered from Ancient Egypt by Queen Tera in *The Jewel of Seven Stars* seems to embody the secret and lost spiritual knowledge revered by Blavatsky and others.

Aleister Crowley was also active in the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn a couple of decades later. In 1904 Crowley was staying in Cairo where his holy guardian angel, Aiwass was said to have dictated the *Book of the Law*, which draws on modern versions of Egyptian names and symbols. Crowley's *Book of Thoth*, read the 22 cards of the Tarot as corresponding to the letters of the Hebrew alphabet and their Egyptian counterparts.

Gothic Fashion

One of the symbols of theosophy is the ankh – the very important symbol of life in Ancient Egypt.

Dight green faience ankh from Meroe in Sudan (UC43949). In the Objects by Site: Meroe Case. Other examples of the ankh can be seen in at 9b. The King worshipping the god Min and carrying an ankh on a slab from Koptos in Dynasty 17 1650–1550 BC) and 9c.Wooden ankhs possibly from a mummification table.

The ankh is the Egyptian word for life and the symbol is the way it was written in hieroglpyh. There is no agreement on why that symbol was used – some scholars argue that it represents the Nile or was a girdle or the fastenings of a sandal.

The ankh is still worn today and is fashionable in some goth subcultures. In the cartoon *Nemi* (by LiseMyrhe), the main character is a goth and is shown with an ankh over her bed rather than the Christian cross (though the ankh shape is also used as a cross by Christian Egyptians today).

The Ankh is worn by the character Death in the Sandman comics (1989–1996). In the spin-off *Death: the High Cost of Living* (1993), written by Neil Gaiman with art by Chris Bachalo and Mark Buckingham, Death buys a silver ankh fully aware of its symbolic meaning.

Death wears heavy black eye make up, with one eye drawn in the symbolism of the wedjat eye (or the Eye of Horus), the symbol of power and protection.

Blue faience wedjat eye with an arm holding ankh sign below (UC29866). In Objects by Site: Temples Case.

The goth music band Sisters of Mercy used the wedjat eye on the cover of their 1990 album *Vision Thing*, while the goth/industrial music independent label Cleopatra Records use the wedjat eye as their logo.

Goths and gothic fashion is often associated with heavy eye makeup. However, the discovery of Tutankhamen's tomb and kohl pots in there also lead to surge of heavy eye make-up and replica kohl pots being sold in the 1920s.

In this case are some **kohl pots** (26200, 26199 and 26203) **with other cosmetic objects**

Gothic has far wider connotations than a literary form. It incorporates fashion, furnishings, film, music etc... Catherine Spooner has argued that 'above all gothic sells'. True, but there is more. Gothic Egypt is a knowing use of the past to induce terror and fear of the unknown: an affectation based on fascination, tinged with fear, around Egypt.

Lise Myrrhe, *Nemi* (reprinted in the *Metro* 2010)

And 'Death' in Neil Gaiman, Chris Bachalo and Mark Buckingham, Death: the High Cost of Living (1993).





We want to know more about 'Gothic Egypt'

What do you think is gothic about Egypt? Or is it? Let us know. . .

Further Reading

Some Gothic Tales

Arthur Conan Doyle, Lot No. 249 (1892)

The Ring of Thoth (1890)

Theophile Gautier, The Mummy's Foot (1845)

The Romance of the Mummy (1857)

Richard Marsh, The Beetle (1897)

Sax Rohmer, Brood of the Witch Queen (1918)

Bram Stoker, The Jewel of Seven Stars (1903)

Neil Gaiman, Chris Bachalo and Mark Buckingham, *Death: the High Cost of Living* (1993)

Books About 'Gothic'

Arthur C. Aufderheide, Secret of the Mummy's Hand (2003)

Fred Botting, Gothic (1996)

E. A. Wallace Budge, Egyptian Magic (1899)

James Stevens Curl, The Egyptian Revival. Ancient Egypt as the inspiration for Design Motifs in the West (2005)

Jasmine Day, The Mummy's Curse: Mummy Mania in the English Speaking World (2007)

Christopher Frayling, The Face of Tutankhamen (1992)

Erik Hornung, The Secret Lore of Egypt. Its Impact on the West (2001)

Mark Nelson, 'The Mummy's Curse: historical cohort study', *British Medical Journal* (December 2002)

Catherine Spooner, Contemporary Gothic (2006)

On Egyptian takes on the mummy story in the wake of the discovery of Tutankhamen see Elliott Colla, *Conflicted Antiquities: Egyptology, Egypolomania, Egyptian Modernity* (2007).

With thanks to John J. Johnston, Simon Guerrier, Stephen Quirke, and Lisa Gledhill.