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Stephen O. Smoot

John Gee

Kerry Muhlestein

John S. Thompson

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The Purpose and Function of the Egyptian Hypocephalus

Facsimile 2 of the Book of Abraham is a type of document called a hypocephalus. “The term ‘hypocephalus’ refers to a piece of Late Period and Ptolemaic [ca. 664–30 BC] funerary equipment. It is specifically, an amuletic disc, made of cartonnage, bronze, textile, and more rarely, papyrus, or even wood, emulating a solar disc.”¹ The name was coined by modern Egyptologists beginning with Jean-François Champollion and comes from Greek, meaning literally “under the head.”² Spell 162 of the ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead specifies that these amulets were to be placed *hr tp* of the mummy, which has been widely rendered as “under the head” of the mummy.³

Today there are 158 known hypocephali that have been catalogued or published.⁴ Based on their attested chronological and geographical distribution, “it is clear that the use of the hypocephalus never became widespread” in ancient Egypt. Instead, they “remained exclusive pieces of funerary equipment reserved for the clergy and for the members of their families

1. Tamás Mekis, *The Hypocephalus: An Ancient Egyptian Funerary Amulet* (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2020), 2. Other nonround funerary objects that served a same or similar purpose to the “classic” flat disc-shaped hypocephalus have also been identified. See John Gee, “Non-round Hypocephali,” in *Aegyptus et Pannonia III: Acta Symposii anno 2004*, ed. Hedvig Győry (Budapest: Ancient Egyptian Committee of the Hungarian-Egyptian Friendship Society, 2006), 41–54.

2. Champollion used this designation based on a bilingual Greek-Egyptian papyrus in the Louvre that commanded the text be placed ὑπο τὴν κεφαλὴν (*hypo tēn kephalēn*) or “under the head.” Jean-François Champollion, *Notice descriptive des monuments Égyptiens du Musée du Charles X* (Paris: L’Imprimerie De Crapelet, 1827), 155; Mekis, *Hypocephalus*, 5 n. 5.

3. A more technically correct translation of the Egyptian phrase appears to mean “at the head” or “beside the head” of the mummy, meaning at very least in some proximity to the deceased. Gee, “Non-round Hypocephali,” 49–50.

4. These have been helpfully collected in Mekis, *Hypocephalus*.

who occupied also priestly positions in the *pallacide* of the temples,” especially the temple of Amun at Karnak, the temple of Min at Akhmim, and the temple of Ptah at Memphis.⁵ Although hypocephali themselves appear to be later creations, the mythological and cosmological conceptions contained in hypocephali have apparent forerunners in earlier Egyptian texts.⁶

According to Spell 162 of the Book of the Dead, hypocephali served a number of important purposes: to protect the deceased in the afterlife, to provide light and heat for the deceased, to make the deceased “appear again like one who is on earth” (that is, to resurrect them), and to ultimately transform the deceased into a god.⁷ Hypocephali were also conceived of (and even sometimes explicitly identified as) the magical eye of the sun god Re that consumed enemies with fire. Their circular shape and function of providing light, heat, and protection naturally lent themselves to this conceptualization in the minds of the ancient Egyptians.⁸ Because there are so many extant hypocephali with varied features that draw on often arcane or easily misunderstood aspects of ancient Egyptian myth and religion, different methodologies have been used to try to understand this type of document with sometimes very different results. “Just as the evidence left from the past often leaves itself open to multiple interpretations, so also multiple methodologies may be used to examine and analyze that evidence. The researcher must make choices about which legitimate methods to use. Different methods sometimes yield different results.”⁹ For this reason, any modern interpretation of the meaning of the figures and texts contained on hypocephali should always leave room for the possibility of a plurality of approaches.¹⁰

5. Mekis, *Hypocephalus*, 2, emphasis in original.

6. Mekis, *Hypocephalus*, 2.

7. Quote in Mekis, *Hypocephalus*, 3. For an accessible translation of Spell 162, see Michael D. Rhodes, “A Translation and Commentary of the Joseph Smith Hypocephalus,” *BYU Studies* 17, no. 3 (Spring 1977): 260–62; and Michael D. Rhodes, “The Joseph Smith Hypocephalus . . . Twenty Years Later,” unpublished manuscript, [1997], <https://www.magicgatebg.com/Books/Joseph%20Smith%20Hypocephalus.pdf>, 13–14; compare Hugh Nibley and Michael D. Rhodes, *One Eternal Round*, The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley 19 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2010), 224–30; and Mekis, *Hypocephalus*, 2–4.

8. Mekis, *Hypocephalus*, 31, 52–57; Rhodes, “Twenty Years Later,” 1.

9. John Gee, “The Effect of Methodological Choices on the Understanding of Hypocephali,” *Bibliotheca Orientalis* 79, nos. 1–2 (January–April 2022): 5.

10. Gee, “Effect of Methodological Choices,” esp. 7–11, provides several examples illustrating this point, including some that have direct relevance to Joseph Smith’s interpretation of Facsimile 2.

While these might perhaps have been the primary purposes of hypocephali, it is clear from the explanatory rubric of some copies of Spell 162 of the Book of the Dead and from other surviving evidence that they also served other roles. For example, hypocephali (or objects that served the same purpose as hypocephali) may have been used as divinatory devices in the Egyptian temple and as astronomical documents.¹¹ This is especially significant since Joseph Smith's interpretation of Facsimile 2 draws connections to modern temples and features several astronomical elements. Hypocephali also shared a conceptual link with temple gates. In this capacity, they served, among other things, to keep out enemies and admit friends into sacred space and shared a focus on creation motifs.¹² Furthermore, hypocephali illustrate everything that the sun encircles, including the world of the living on the top and the underworld on the bottom. In this regard, hypocephali sought to capture the aspect of the cyclical rebirth of the sun, which was conceptualized as (re)creation.¹³ Once again, this parallels Joseph Smith's explanations of Facsimile 2, which emphasize themes of creation. While hypocephali served a number of important religious and ritual purposes for the ancient Egyptians, they ultimately "point[ed] toward the Egyptians' hope in a resurrection and life after death as a divine being."¹⁴

Finally, it is noteworthy that there appear to have been ancient connections between Abraham and the hypocephalus. For example, in one Egyptian papyrus, Abraham is referred to as "the pupil of the *wedjat*-eye" and associated with the primeval creator god.¹⁵ "Moreover, in view of the representations of Amon in the centre panel of the discs, hypocephali

11. Gee, "Non-round Hypocephali," 51–54; John Gee, "Hypocephali as Astronomical Documents," in *Aegyptus et Pannonia V: Acta Symposii anno 2008*, ed. Hedvig Györy and Ádám Szabó (Budapest: Ancient Egyptian Committee of the Hungarian-Egyptian Friendship Society, 2016), 59–71.

12. John Gee, "Hypocephali and Gates," in *Aegyptus et Pannonia VI: Acta Symposii anno 2019*, ed. Hedvig Györy (Budapest: Ancient Egyptian Committee of the Hungarian-Egyptian Friendship Society, 2020), 25–36.

13. Mekis, *Hypocephalus*, 32, 40, 52, 54–56.

14. Rhodes, "Twenty Years Later," 12.

15. Quotation in John Gee, "Abraham in Ancient Egyptian Texts," *Ensign* 22, no. 7 (July 1992): 61; compare F. L. Griffith and Herbert Thompson, *The Demotic Magical Papyrus of London and Leiden* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1921), 64–65; Hans Dieter Betz, ed., *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation: Including the Demotic Spells* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 208; and John Gee, "Abracadabra, Isaac, and Jacob," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 7, no. 1 (1995): 77–80. As Gee, "Abraham in Ancient Egyptian Texts," 61, explains, "The *wedjat*-eye was a symbol of perfection, prosperity,

are properly equivalent in the Egyptian belief system with the pupil of the wedjat-eye itself.”¹⁶ Michael D. Rhodes has also drawn attention to a possible allusion to the hypocephalus in an extrabiblical text that prominently features Abraham.

The Apocalypse of Abraham describes a vision Abraham saw while making a sacrifice to God. In this vision he is shown the plan of the universe, “what is in the heavens, on the earth, in the sea, and in the abyss” (almost the exact words used in the left middle portion of the Joseph Smith Hypocephalus). He is shown “the fullness of the whole world and its circle,” in a picture with two sides. The similarity with the hypocephalus is striking. There is even a description of what are clearly the four canopic figures labeled number 6 in the Joseph Smith Hypocephalus. The significance of these documents is that they date from the beginning of the Christian era—they are roughly contemporary with the hypocephalus and the other Egyptian documents purchased by Joseph Smith—and they relate the same things about Abraham that Joseph Smith said are found in the hypocephalus and the other Egyptian papyri.¹⁷

Besides being interesting and informative in its own right, understanding the purpose and function of the ancient Egyptian hypocephalus is therefore crucial to evaluating Joseph Smith’s interpretation of Facsimile 2 and to helping readers of the Book of Abraham better appreciate why such a document might have been recontextualized by the Prophet to illustrate Abraham’s record.

Further Reading

Gee, John. “Hypocephalus.” In *The Pearl of Great Price Reference Companion*, edited by Dennis L. Largey, 161–62. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017.

Nibley, Hugh, and Michael D. Rhodes. *One Eternal Round*. The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley 19. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2010.

preservation, wholeness, completion, health, and resurrection; in Christian times it was the word the Copts used for salvation.”

16. Mekis, *Hypocephalus*, 4; compare Nibley and Rhodes, *One Eternal Round*, 332–33.

17. Rhodes, “Twenty Years Later,” 7; compare Nibley and Rhodes, *One Eternal Round*, 352–55; and Kevin L. Barney, “The Facsimiles and Semitic Adaptation of Existing Sources,” in *Astronomy, Papyrus, and Covenant*, ed. John Gee and Brian M. Hauglid (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2005), 121–22.

Rhodes, Michael D. "The Joseph Smith Hypocephalus . . . Twenty Years Later." Unpublished manuscript, [1997]. <https://www.magicgatebg.com/Books/Joseph%20Smith%20Hypocephalus.pdf>.

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FIGURE 33. Hypocephalus of Tadjit (Louvre, E 6208), cartonnage drawn with black ink; Ptolemaic Period. Photograph by Stephen T. Whitlock. Courtesy Stephen T. Whitlock.



FIGURE 34. Hypocephalus of Hor (British Museum, EA 35875), textile based cartonnage drawn with black ink; Ptolemaic Period. Image from www.britishmuseum.org. © The Trustees of the British Museum. All rights reserved.



FIGURE 35. Hypocephalus of Tasheritkhonsu (British Museum, EA 37909), stuccoed linen drawn with black ink; Ptolemaic Period. Image from www.britishmuseum.org. © The Trustees of the British Museum. All rights reserved.



FIGURE 36. Hypocephalus of Iahmes (Louvre, N 3525 A), stuccoed linen drawn with black ink; Ptolemaic Period. Photograph by Stephen T. Whitlock. Courtesy Stephen T. Whitlock.



FIGURE 37. Hypocephalus of Osirwer (Louvre, N 3182), stuccoed linen drawn with black ink; Ptolemaic Period. Photograph by Stephen T. Whitlock. Courtesy Stephen T. Whitlock.



FIGURE 38. Hypocephalus of Neshorpakhered (British Museum, EA 36188), stuccoed linen drawn with black ink; Ptolemaic Period. Image from www.britishmuseum.org. © The Trustees of the British Museum. All rights reserved.



FIGURE 39. Hypocephalus of Istemakhbit (Louvre, N 3524), gilded textile cartonnage with engraving; Late Period. Photograph by Stephen T. Whitlock. Courtesy Stephen T. Whitlock.



FIGURE 40. Hypocephalus of Padjiamunipt (Louvre, E 18940), cartonnage drawn with black and red ink; Ptolemaic Period. Photograph by Stephen T. Whitlock. Courtesy Stephen T. Whitlock.



FIGURE 41. Hypocephalus of Tanetirit (Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, AMS 62), cartonnage drawn with black ink; Ptolemaic Period. National Museum of Antiquities, Leiden, Netherlands; CC0 license.