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Smiting the Enemies of Egypt

Pectoral depicting King
Amenemhat III smiting
the enemies of Egypt.



This lovely pectoral, owned by Queen Mereret, daughter of Senwoseret III is an image of delicacy and detail as well as a powerful symbol. It would have relayed a message to ancient Egyptian viewers that King Amenemhat III (Mereret's brother) was extremely powerful. It depicts mirror images of the king, wielding a mace in his raised hand and holding one of the enemies of Egypt by the hair with his other hand. The enemy kneels in submission and offers the king his weapons.

Notice that the king is far larger than the enemy. His foot is almost as long as the foreigner's leg. This difference in scale is meant to illustrate the importance and strength of the king in relation to the foreigner. In front of the kneeling foreigner, hieroglyphs identify him as an Asiatic.

The Asiatics are just one example of non-Egyptians that could have been used effectively in this scene. Egypt traditionally had nine enemies, sometimes called the nine bows. They included the Libyans, Asiatics, and, at times, the Nubians, among others. Since these groups did not follow the Egyptian religion or speak the native tongue, to the Egyptians they existed outside the limits of order, and therefore were viewed as chaotic and dangerous forces. It was the king's duty to eliminate sources of chaos (*isfet*) and maintain order (*maat*). Thus the smiting scene was symbolic of the king's obligation to the Egyptian people. The choice of an Asiatic on this pectoral is interesting because, at the time of its manufacture, Asiatics were being encouraged to come to Egypt in order to assist with Amenemhat III's extensive building program.

RIGHT
Detail of vulture

BELOW
The mirror images of the
smiting king and the
hieroglyphs in between
reads "Amenemhat the
good god and lord of the
two lands smites every
foreign land."



Behind the king, an anthropomorphized *ankh* holds a fan symbolically bestowing eternal life upon the pharaoh.

Above, the sky goddess Nekhbet, represented as a vulture, offers the king life (*ankh*) and endurance (*djed*) in her talons. Nekhbet is identified by her titles "lady of heaven" and "lady of the two lands." In the center of the piece, underneath the vulture goddess, the hieroglyphs read "Amenemhat the good god and lord of the two lands smites every foreign land." The cartouches contain the king's name. The image of the king (in the act of smiting) acts as a hieroglyphic element of the verb for "smiting."

The entire scene is enclosed in a shrine, evidenced by the cornice at the top, which is like the cornices on actual Egyptian shrines. This may suggest that the enclosed scene represents something divine.

Another visual indicator of the king's power is seen in the materials and methods of manufacture of the pectoral. Acquiring the materials required sending expeditions out of Egypt to other lands, or trading with foreigners. Turquoise was obtained from Wagdi Maghara and from Serabit el Khadim in the Sinai Peninsula. Carnelian was gathered from the Eastern Desert between the Nile Valley and the Red Sea. Gold was also obtained from the Eastern Desert and from Nubia. In fact, the word "Nubia" is derived from the ancient Egyptian word for "gold" (*nbw*). Lapis lazuli came from northeastern Afghanistan and was obtained through trade with western Asiatics (the same Asiatics being smited in the scene it was used to create!). These materials would have made the long trek by donkey because camels, which allowed travel across the desert, were not found in Egypt until they were introduced by the Persians around 525 BC!

Gathering and shaping the gold, carnelian, turquoise, and lapis lazuli demonstrated the king's ability to control resources so that both the manufacture and the imagery of the pectoral convey the control of the king over foreign (and thus chaotic) forces of Egypt.

