

Obsidian in Ancient Egypt- General Academic Letters

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Obsidian, a natural organic glass has attracted the attention of early man from Paleolithic to recent times. Usually dark black in color, it is the resultant product of a volcano spewing out silica that cools quickly and turns into natural glass. An ideal primitive tool, it was used for many purposes, including art and decoration. Early man in all continents used Obsidian and regarded it highly, most likely due to its shiny luster, deep black color and sharpness. Color variations differ greatly and may only be more recently valued. Besides aesthetic beauty, its ability to be made into cutting and piercing sharp-edged blades made it extremely useful for hunting, shaping it into projectile points and fish hooks.

Decorative and ceremonial items including jewelry, amulets, grave goods and many other objects were made of the black stone. In modern day, surgeons have used it in eye surgery and other major operations as well. Obsidian, like flint, fractures easily and is found in concordant bulbous pieces. Edges can be carefully trimmed or serrated nicely into an artifact that is, undoubtedly made by man, and not by natural wear of the elements. More brittle than flint, obsidian is not usually found as a “barbed” artifact or with serrated characteristics, although there are examples.

Many modern-day projectile points made of obsidian are large, leaf shaped bi-faces. Cores of the stone were most likely carried from the source and fashioned at other various locations, whereby flint flakes could be knocked off the core. The sources of Obsidian were very important and rare to ancient cultures. One might say that there is hardly a stone material that an ancient person has not used to fashion an artifact. As a rule, the best material available would be the stone of choice. These may include obsidian, flint, which is sometimes called jasper, chert, and chalcedony, basalt, felsites and other variances of choices. Chert is an impure form of flint and found in many colors and more brittle than flint. A dull form of weathered obsidian called pitchstone is also found. Obsidian varies in color from a pale greenish-yellow to

olive, to very dark brown or black. It often contains bands of lighter-colored glass or specks of white or light-yellowish feldspar. Colors of the organic glass is dependent on its natural setting. Obsidian is also found in mahogany color called Mahogany Obsidian, wherein it consists of reddish-brown parts, or white flecked or streaked Obsidian, referred to as Snowflake Obsidian.

During the Stone Age, primitive people used obsidian tools mainly because they were sharper than flint. A primary technique, called direct percussion was used to “rough out” or breakdown larger material into handy useful pieces. The larger piece was struck with a hammer stone causing fracture of the core material, sometimes called the mother stone. Indirect percussion was different in that a handheld tool was used to strike a core or flake to shape an artifact. Antler, bone or wood could also be used. Simply a handheld hammer a pointed bone tool which in turn struck the flake to shape it. Pressure flaking was used to put an edge on the tool by pressing firmly against the edge and refined. The classic Folsom projectile point is a prime example. However, Lithic tools such as the drill and graver...grinding tools, mauls (hammers), hoe, spade for digging, are not usually found of Obsidian.

Obsidian is not found naturally in Egypt or nearby territories, but has been found in many royal burials as funerary accessories including its use as a ceremonial object of artistic value. Seen in later dynasties, rarity of Egyptian pre-dynastic obsidian artifacts is gauged from its apparent absence in large collections of objects from some pre-dynastic cemeteries at Abydos. This rarity is extended into the dynastic era as well, and in the predynastic cemetery of Naqada. The Egyptologist, Professor Flinders Petrie excavated several “beads” of obsidian, each one carefully fashioned into a disc, about the diameter of a penny. These rare discs are perforated, the walls of the holes each having a crushed aspect as if they were ground out, as we see in many prehistoric artifact beads. The peripheries of each disc are neatly worked by secondary chipping and seen nowhere else in Egypt.

At the mouth of a canyon at Abydos, where the ancient Egyptians believed to be the entrance to the underworld, obsidian had a place of origin. Tombs of the 1st dynasty rulers of Egypt lie here where Obsidian is found. This entrance to the underworld at one time was mistaken for the “tomb” of Osiris and offerings were left for the god. Some of Archaeologist Sir William Matthew Flinders Petrie (1853-1942) references to Obsidian from his own excavations include:” Abydos – XXXth Dynasty Royal tombs – 5 amulets; pierced flake; XII Dynasty –obsidian flakes, kohl pot and stick, scarabs; XXVI – XXXth Dynasties – amulets, rough chipped beads, predynastic from grave 499.” Petrie also found on the breast of the mummy of Zed-her, obsidian forming part of a set of amulets consisting of limestone, porphyry, hematite, and steatite, chiefly cut into animal shapes. Perhaps the finest relic of obsidian is a masterpiece of the XVth dynasty, a head of Amenemes II from a private collection. (Egyp-

tian Exploration Fund Publications, 1902, 22nd Mem., pt. i. p. 38, and pi. Ixxviii.) Also used as the eyes (eyeballs) on mummy-cases of XIXth-XXXth dynasties, as well as beards from a mummy case; wig from a statue (part); large scarab (part), the use of this lustrous material lasted throughout the ages.

In my ongoing funerary research of KV62, the tomb of Tutankhamun, artifacts are seen made of Obsidian in many tomb artifacts. It is sometimes described with other element terms, such as onyx and jet. The gold death mask of Tutankhamun with obsidian pupils is one example. It's use in the eyes was common as was use with scarabs, jewelry, ushabtis and statuary. The exquisite "pesesh-kef" ritual knife, currently in The Brooklyn Museum New York (acc#351-445) I would describe as not unlike a projectile point, but carved of obsidian in a flattened shape with a fishtail end of serrated edged. It is suggested this ritual funerary knife was used in the religious "opening of the mouth ceremony".

See 2 images*



One of the Obsidian Bracelets found on the Mummy of Tutankhamun Courtesy of the Griffith Inst. Oxford University, UK.

