

**THE GREAT KINGDOMS IN THE  
EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN FROM THE  
BRONZE AGE TO THE EARLY IRON AGE**



*Gold as Dirt:*

**Introduction to textual references to Gold  
in Bronze Age Egypt**

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**Athens 2023**

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*(Cover page: the small head-dress in Winlock 1948,  
The Treasure of Three Princesses)*

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*The scope of this brief essay is to collect epigraphic sources on the importance of gold in Bronze Age Egypt up to the Eighteenth Dynasty. I will begin by presenting a selection of texts from the correspondence of Amarna (XIV century BC), and in the second part, I will try, with the aid of fragments from Old Kingdom texts, to extract the core ideas behind this ancient fascination with gold, and the beautiful golden artworks gracing the collarbones of the aristocrats and their afterlife.*

## **Power to man**

In the archive of cuneiform letters unearthed in Tell el-Amarna, the pharaohs Amenhotep III and his son Akhenaten are called to confront assiduous requests of gold from some of their powerful ‘brothers’, the kings of the Near Eastern realms<sup>1</sup>. During this period, around the fourteenth century BC, contacts between the Mediterranean kingdoms intensify, resulting in a picture of ‘unprecedented international cooperation’<sup>2</sup>. Kings of distant lands, who have never met, start calling each other ‘brothers’, setting up a novel game, whose first rule seems to be to always provide what each brother demands. Prestige items freely circulate, such as ivory, precious and semi-precious stones, spices, metals, perfumed oils and resins. Trade is flourishing in the Mediterranean, but the dynamics of exchange in the Amarna correspondence indicate a new route. Rare materials, princesses with their opulent dowries and gold were not commodities to trade, but diplomatic tools: their exchange was intended as a strategic move to assure peace and international stability.

Egypt was known for being rich in gold. Its gold-bearing region, lying “between the Nile Valley and the Red Sea”<sup>3</sup>, largely corresponded to Lower Nubia and the Sudan portion of Upper Nubia, contested for a long time by the Kingdom of Kush and annexed to Egypt under Thutmose III (1479-1425 BC)<sup>4</sup>. Nubian resources were thus integrated into the Egyptian economy, in particular gold, “the mined amounts of which ran into the hundreds of kilograms a year”<sup>5</sup>.

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1 Moran 1992 for the translations of the Amarna letters.

2 Podany 2010.

3 Lucas 1948.

4 The annexation of Wawat, known for its mines, seems to date back earlier, to the times of Kamose before the beginning of the eighteenth dynasty (Van Mieroop 2021, 155)

5 Van Mieroop 2021, 156.

The reign of Amenhotep III (1390-1350 BC) prospered in peace and its affluence did not pass unnoticed to the kings of the Eastern Mediterranean. In at least eleven of the Amarna letters, the request for Egyptian gold is rather explicit<sup>6</sup> Most letters follow a precise scheme, the opening formula of greeting, the mutual declaration of friendship inherited from the ancestors<sup>7</sup>, prelude for the kings to advance their requests or complaints. Letter EA 16, written by Assur-ubalit, king of Assyria, to Amenhotep III, is quite eloquent in this regard:

“Is such a present that of a Great King? *Gold in your country is dirt*<sup>8</sup>; one simply gathers it up. Why are you so sparing of it? I am engaged in building a new palace. Send me as much gold as is needed for its adornment. When Assur-nadin-abbe, my ancestor, wrote to Egypt, 20 talents of gold were sent to him. When the king of Hanigalbat [wrote to your father in Egypt], he sent 20 talents of gold to him. Now I am the [equal] of the king of Hanigalbat, but you sent me [...] of gold, and it is not enough for the pay of my messengers on the journey to and back”.

Dissatisfaction with the gold cargo sent by the pharaoh is also a common motif. Egyptian gold, in fact, often naturally displayed a high percentage of silver, 16 per cent or more<sup>9</sup>, or was possibly adulterated with copper on purpose before being dispatched abroad<sup>10</sup>. The deception was eventually exposed once the royal smiths melted the golden *minas* in the kiln. The babylonian king Burra-Buriyash complains that “*the 20 minas of gold that were brought here were not all there. When they put it into the kiln, not 5 minas of gold appeared*” (EA 10)<sup>11</sup>. Kadashman-Enlil threatens the pharaoh to cease the communication and not to send his daughter, if he does not send the amount of gold necessary to complete his work:

“Send me the gold I asked you about, in order for me to finish the work I am engaged with. If you send me this gold after I finish the work I will not even accept 3000 talents of it and I will not give you my daughter”. (EA4)

At this time gold was exclusive prerogative of the royal families. Its importance had no monetary value<sup>12</sup>, but could only coincide with the life of a princess. This way Amenhotep III extended his

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6 Podany 2010: “*They almost all did it—Tushratta of Mittani, Kadashman-Enlil I and then Burna-buriash II of Babylonia, Ashur-uballit of Assyria, and even a Hittite prince*”.

7 "From the time my ancestors and your ancestors made a mutual declaration of friendship, they sent beautiful greeting-gifts to each other, and refused no request for anything beautiful". (EA 9)

8 Translation by Moran. Alternative versions: ‘like dirt, like sand’.

9 Petrie in Lucas 1948, 259: “*the difference between gold and electrum is entirely arbitrary*”.

10 Conversation with professor Kopanias. Gold debased by the addition of copper is a known trait of the artworks dating to the Eighteenth Dynasty, especially the finger rings (Petrie in Lucas 1948, 263).

11 Babylonian kings and gold: Kadashman-Enlil: EA3, EA4; Burra-Buriyash: EA7, EA9, EA10.

12 It will be adopted as ‘a medium of exchange’ at the time of the Persians. Forbes 1965, VIII, 180.

*harem* with the daughters of foreign kings, not without a touch of derision: “*It is a fine thing that you give your daughters in order to acquire a nugget of gold from your neighbors!*” (EA 1). And in turn he felt exempt from the obligation to reciprocate. In the same letter (EA4) Kadashman-Enlil resents the pharaoh’s “practice of not giving his daughters” and even suggests the pharaoh send a woman disguised as his daughter. Here it is interesting to notice how a princess and gold played the same role in the international relations between kings.

The obsession with gold is otherwise inexplicable. All Levantine kings tried to justify their desire by the prospect of a noble endeavour to accomplish, the construction of a temple or mausoleum, and as the price for their daughter.

This two-folded explanation is also expressed by the Mitannian king, Tushratta, as gentler persuasion, wanting to satisfy his longing for gold in virtue of *râmu*, mutual love between brothers, to create harmony and *not to cause distress*:

“In my brother's country, *gold is as plentiful as dirt*. May the gods grant that, just as now gold is plentiful in my brother's country, he make it even ten times more plentiful than now. May the gold that I ask for not become a source of distress to my brother, and may my brother not cause me distress. May my brother send me in very large quantities gold that has not been worked. Whatever my brother needs for his house, let him write and take [it]. I will give ten times more than what my brother asks for. This country is my brother's country, and this house is my brother's house” (EA19)

The expressions are repetitive, to the point it is not clear whether they were meant to hypnotise or were uttered by the hypnotised. Supreme symbol of power, gold began representing a measure of “love”, or rather “respect” amongst kings of different lands: “*If your purpose is graciously one of friendship, send me much gold. And this is your house. Write me so what you need may be fetched*” (EA16). Albeit the symmetry in this agreement between brothers was clearly only apparent<sup>13</sup>, the result was an age of peace and reciprocal influences.

The Amarna letters, with their demands and inventory lists, constitute one of the first epigraphic sources on the world-wide obsession with gold, worth daughters and a promise of eternity: “*Just as we love each other now exactly as now, so may we love each other forevermore*” (EA19).

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13 “It doesn’t seem that the pharaohs had any equivalent obsession with gifts from any of the other lands” (Podany 2010, 244).

## Solitude of man or Power to the divine

The fascination with gold possibly began “before writing was known”<sup>14</sup>. The first golden beads in Egypt date back to prehistoric times (8000-5000BC) and pressed gold foils were already employed in the artwork of the 1<sup>st</sup> Dynasty, to achieve copies of spiral shells<sup>15</sup>. Its importance must reside in the observation of its low reactivity. The method used to reach the conclusion of gold not decaying over time is the first mystery. This property intuitively turned it into the supreme material to secure immortality in the afterlife, hence the luxurious gold items in the graves of those able to afford it.

Gold was the pharaoh’s reward for the value and loyalty of his officials and warriors. One example is reported in the autobiographical inscription of the marine Ahmose, son of Abana<sup>16</sup>:

“There was a naval battle on the canal of Avaris. I took a captive and carried off a severed hand. When it was reported to the king’s herald, I was given the gold of valour.”

Akhenaton (1353–1336) commands to adorn the “great seer of Aton”, the high priest Merire, with abundance of gold in his tomb:

“Put gold at his throat and at his back, and gold on his legs, because of his hearing the teaching of Pharaoh, L. P. H., concerning every saying in these beautiful seats which Pharaoh has made in the sanctuary in the Aton-house of Aton in Akhetaton, filled with every good thing, with much corn and southern grain, the Aton offerings of the Aton.”<sup>17</sup>

Gracing the priest of the god with beauty was an efficacious way to be graced with beauty by the god. The significance of gold ornaments on the throat is also manifest from the hieroglyph itself of gold, rendered as a necklace<sup>18</sup>, and from the numerous golden collars unearthed in the royal tombs.

Likewise, the minor wives of the pharaoh boasted a rich funerary *trousseau*, like the one of the three princesses excavated by Winlock in Thebes, though the golden artwork might be less refined<sup>19</sup>. Mirrors, wings, sandals, rings, necklaces in gold were needed to sustain beauty in spite of the injuries of time on the body. Those mirrors would eternally reflect one single image.

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14 Petrie 1910.

15 Petrie 1910.

16 From the Writings of Ancient Egypt (Wilkinson 2016): the reward of gold is mentioned thrice, which perhaps enabled the marine to “rest in the tomb which he himself made”. Ahmose served under the first three kings of the Eighteenth Dynasty.

17 Breasted 1910, 407.

18 Petrie 1910.

19 Winlock 1948. The Treasure of Three Egyptian Princesses: minor wives of Thutmose III: their status is indicated by the gazelle heads on the head-dress, instead of the royal symbols of the uraeus and vulture.

Some objects belonged to the jewellery worn by the deceased in their life, others were specifically crafted to assist them in the transition to the afterlife. In this very moment, in fact, the presence of gold ceases to be a measure of wealth, to extort to other kings, or display to the world, to return to an intimate dimension. Man is alone in front of their achievements, advancing towards the gods. The sarcophagus is named “House of Gold in which one rests”, that is the site of the body’s transfiguration, the purse of immortal light. Since the times of the New Kingdom, the symbol of solar rebirth of the *Amduat* was incorporated in the sarcophagus chamber, as if to “magically equate the nightly rejuvenation of the sun god Re with the transfiguration of the deceased king and his ultimate rebirth as a solar deity”<sup>20</sup>. However, the alchemical association of sun and gold is not explicit in the early Egyptian literature. Gold is instead one of the epithets of Hathor<sup>21</sup>, goddess of fertility, represented as cow. In the Pyramid Texts of the Old Kingdom, the adjective golden qualifies the pharaoh Pepi I (VI Dynasty). In the recitation for Pepi I ‘*entering the womb of Nut*’:

“for Horus whom the Two Lands desire, Pepi;  
the Dual King, Pepi; the one whom the Two Ladies’ belly desires, Pepi;  
the Dual Falcons’ Golden One, Pepi;  
Geb’s heir, whom he desired, Pepi; the one whom all the gods desire,  
Pepi, given life, stability, authority, and all happiness like the Sun, alive forever”.

In this evocative fragment the king Pepi I is depicted as the heir of the earth god in the process of being remodelled in the womb of the sky. This “homology sky-earth”<sup>22</sup> is one of the first intuitions revealing the transformations of nature, the old babylonian view of night engendering the day and the cyclicity of the phenomenon of life. The understanding of the order of nature governing the events on earth bears the promise of its reflection in the sky, and the possibility to transform the future through the observation of the past, and afterlife through the actions occurring during life. According to Mircea Eliade, the transformations of nature constitute the authentic meaning of metallurgic art, whose scope, within the alchemical tradition, resides in the transformation of oneself through the transmutation of the metals, where gold stands for “the soul absolutely free”. Even though, the ideas of metamorphosis, self-perfectioning, purification of the soul and purification

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20 Roberson 2008 in Trapp 2023: from the time of Seti I, XIV Dynasty, “the sidewalls [of the sarcophagus] acquired an arched shape, creating a curved vault in place of the flat ceiling found in the ‘Amduat-style’ burial chamber”. Another important details of the House of the Gold is its positioning towards the south (Wallis Budge 1909: Book of the Opening of the Mouth).

21 Brich in Wilkinson in Lanzzone 1974: a form of *Venus Aurea*.

22 Eliade 1992.

of the metals, already permeate the religions of the Bronze Age and the Ancient Egyptian conception of the afterlife, their organisation in an “alchemical corpus” is much more recent and dates back to the Hellenistic times<sup>23</sup>. The formation of alloys has been known since prehistoric times, copper was likely added to gold in an attempt to “multiply it”<sup>24</sup>, smelting in the kilns often involved the burning of magical herbs<sup>25</sup>, and the practice of colouring the metals to endow them with new properties is attested before the Greek papyri of Leiden, as the “rose-purple film” covering the small golden ornaments in the tomb of Tutankhamen shows<sup>26</sup>. There was certainly a vigorous set of practices, knowledge and magical intents, but none of these are recorded in ancient times, either by chance or by the separation of these activities from the royal scribes’ interests.

In the text known as “teachings of Khety”, dating to the Eighteenth Dynasty but possibly a copy from older times, the task of the scribe is praised as the only one worth of the free man. The coppersmith working “at the mouth of his furnace”, vibrant expression in the later alchemical compositions, is depicted with rugged fingers “*like a crocodile’s, and he stinks more than a fish roe*”<sup>27</sup>. Not by chance has the tone been dubbed as satirical.

The profession of the goldsmith, however, was more sophisticated, as their operations deserve a space in the wall paintings of royal tombs since at least the Fifth Dynasty. Their products ranged from gold work of high precision and to the manipulation of large amounts at one time<sup>28</sup>, eg. the golden “House of the Gold” of Tutankhamen. Nothing is known about the state of surveillance of the complete entourage of gold workers in Ancient Egypt: from the prospectors, the miners (who are thought to be working in deadly conditions<sup>29</sup>), to the goldsmith and the jewellers. The question is perhaps not trivial: were all of them aware of the properties of gold, were they loyal to the king, were they kept under control? The status of the goldsmith was clearly more prestigious in virtue of

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23 Eliade 1992 reconstructs the background of alchemy in Ancient Mesopotamia. Lindsay 1970 focuses on the elements of alchemy in the Graeco-Roman Egypt.

24 Concept of fermentation formulated by Zosimos of Panopolis, gnostic alchemist who lived in Egypt in the III century AD. See note 10.

25 Forbes 1965, Eliade 1992.

26 Wood 1934. The alteration of colour as a means to impress a “volatile spirit” on a metal was known to Democritus. Eliade 1992. The magical papyri of Leiden date to the III century BC and contain several recipes on colourations, dyes and herbs.

27 Writings from Ancient Egypt.

28 Lucas 1948, 263 – 264: “gold was shaped both by hammering and casting [...], engraved and embossed; [...] used in the form of granules for decorative purposes; [...] made into thin sheets for covering furniture, wooden coffins and other objects, for plating copper and silver and for cutting into thin strips to make wire; it was beaten into still thinner leaf for gilding; it was coloured, soldered and burnished”. This practice of plating wooden objects is the treatment reserved to the statues requested to the pharaoh by Tushratta in the Amarna letters, who instead had specified ‘statues of solid gold’. The Mitannian king’s disappointment is immense. Moran 1992. Podany 2010.

29 According to classical authors, Van Mieroop 2021.



the knowledge they wielded, which did not leave trace in the records, and their closeness to the mystery of natural transformations.

In the text carved on the walls of the funerary temple of Pepi I reported above, the golden pharaoh is compared to the Sun, and figures as the element which comprises all dualities: he is the 'Dual Falcon'. The falcon is one of the symbols of Horus, who is also called the Golden Child. Horus, son of Isis and Osiris, is the one who defeats death to come back to life and vindicate his father, he represents the victory over Seth. Horus represents the vital principle in nature, the immortal seed that replenish energy in the world and restore the order. These became, in fact, part of the formulaic titles of the king<sup>30</sup>. In the hymn to Senusret III<sup>31</sup>, the pharaoh receives the name of Golden Horus as he embodies the image the divine protector of the land. Assuring peace and fighting death by the affirmation of inextinguishable life are the main traits ascribable to gold. These are at the base of the political affairs outlined in the Amarna correspondence (diplomatic gift exchange on the one hand, and the promise of prosperity of a daughter abroad on the other), but above all are reflected in the attitude of men towards eternal life.

If the alchemist transforms oneself by operating on natural phenomena, the Egyptian sage operates one's transformation by imitating the gods. Another difference, in my opinion, is the platonic schism between what is apparent and what is real during man's life, presupposed by the alchemical research, which could not seemingly be of concern for the life of a pharaoh. The only preoccupation was the afterlife: the sarcophagus is named "House of Gold" perhaps in memory of the gods' bodies made of gold, thus immutable<sup>32</sup>. This is the most important statement on the significance of gold in Ancient Egyptian religion.

At the same time, gold as epithet of Hathor should not surprise. She is the mother representing the eternal possibility of life, from generation to generation, as the force of love is eternal even when its manifestations are transitory.

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30 Golden Horus Name is the fifth titulary name of the pharaoh, preceded by the hieroglyph of a falcon. The pharaoh's names are: the Horus name (as the successor of Osiris), the praenomen, the nomen (these two written in cartouches) the 'two ladies' name and 'golden Horus'.

31 Writings from Ancient Egypt, 97. This hymn is dedicated to a monarch of the Twelfth Dynasty (1836-1818 BC).

32 From the Pyramid Texts: "Teti will provide himself with his metal limbs, Teti will stride the sky to the Marsh of Reeds, ...[The gods' bodies were thought to be made of gold]".

## Conclusions

The texts of Bronze Age Egypt so far at our disposal never reveal observations on the properties of gold, nor on its functions. For instance, even though cosmetic receptacles made of gold are known since the Third Dynasty<sup>33</sup>, it is not clear whether its use had any cosmetic, medical or apotropaic value<sup>34</sup>. The value of gold is taken for granted, and the scattered references to it in the royal hymns and as part of a god's epithet, can be interpreted as symbolical, but they should definitely not be read as part of a coherent scheme of cosmogony. Details in the religions of prehistoric times always had purpose, for the very reason that beauty and eternal image on the one hand and, on the other, ornaments and protections had the same meaning. In Egypt, shreds of lapis-lazuli adorning a child's neck were meant to avert all evil<sup>35</sup>. There thus remains the question on the magical properties of gold, which served as a model of incorruptibility and image of eternity to accompany the dead in their transition into the afterlife. After all, the intuition was correct, and the treasures in the royal burials made these figures from the past omnipresent, immortal in the eyes of the archaeologists writing the history of these kings. Their desire has been fulfilled.

In the first part of the essay, we ascertained the obsession with gold did not spare the monarchs of the Near Eastern Kingdoms during the Amarna Age. These were willing to increase their wealth at the cost of playing the beggars in front of the pharaohs, and of giving away their own daughters. At this time gold was not mediated by currency, nor was a medium of exchange. Therefore, its importance must have resided in a different parameter: the beauty, the rarity, the properties. The references to gold in the religious text are too disorganised to draw a conclusion without the archaeological findings of gold in the burials. The lack of reactivity of gold was certainly observed and represented as a divine model for man, as the "liberated soul" of later alchemical terms. The secrets of goldworking, more ancient than writing, in Dynastic Egypt, were perhaps simply no matter to divulge.

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33 In the Pyramid of Sekhmhet (Goneim in Forbes 1965).

34 Metals and stones were used in Egyptian cosmetics. There are instructions to preserve a lotion in an alabaster vase, or to use the powder of alabaster (In the Edwin Smith Surgical Papyrus, XVI century bc). The usage of colloidal gold is today adopted in the medical practice.

35 So I read in Eliade 1992, who dates the tradition to the XV century BC.

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# Illustrations

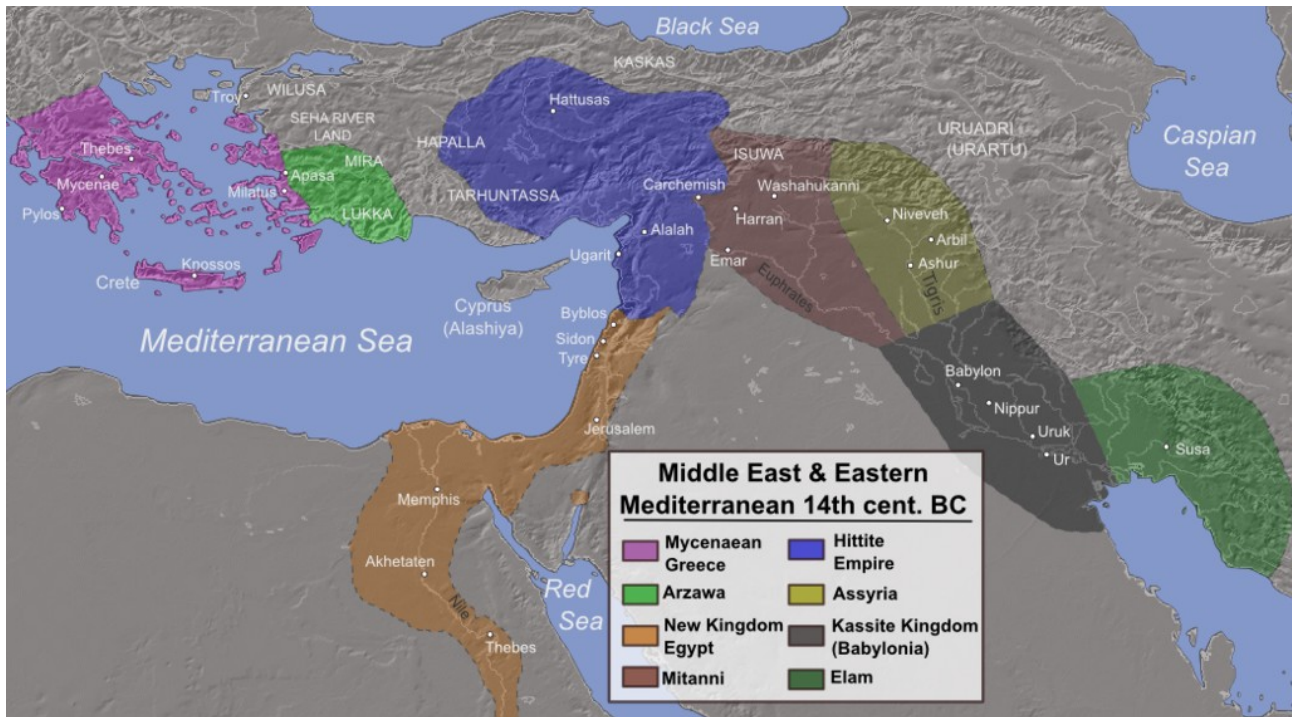


Figure 1: Self-explanatory map.

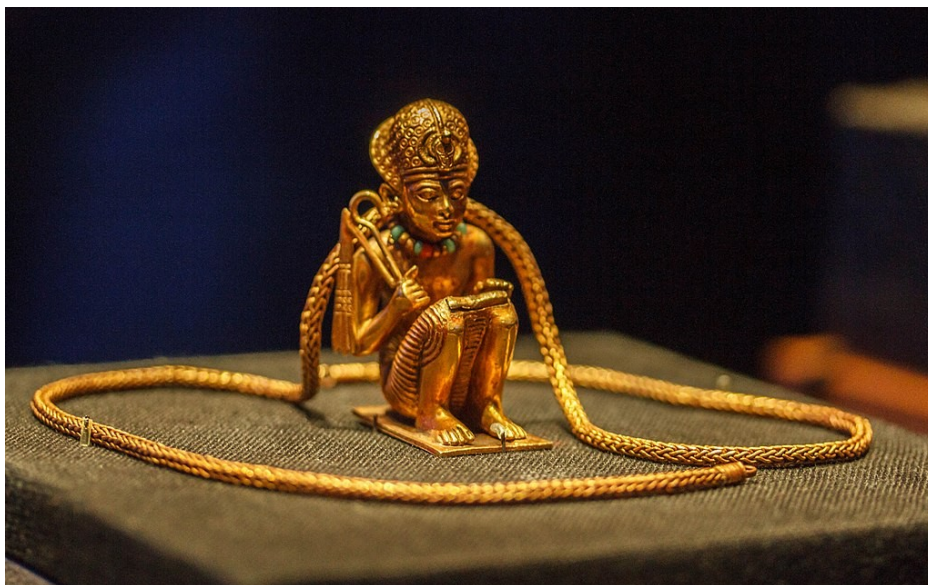


Figure 2: TT100, Tomb of Rekhmire, Thebes: goldsmiths at work.





*Figure 3: Tutankhamen's House of Gold*



*Figure 4: Amulet of Amenhotep III*

From the treasure of the three princesses, Winlock 1948.



Figure 6: Silver mirrors with golden handles



Figure 5: Golden head-dress



Figure 7: Golden sets of fingers



Figure 8: Sandals



of the princesses



in gold.