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“Let’s try the new wig,” Iset squeals, fingering a delicate diadem with rosette inlays and a golden uraeus designed to sit on my brow. The birds playing in the pool, just outside my open wall, erupt in song, as if they’re as excited about my new clothes as she is.



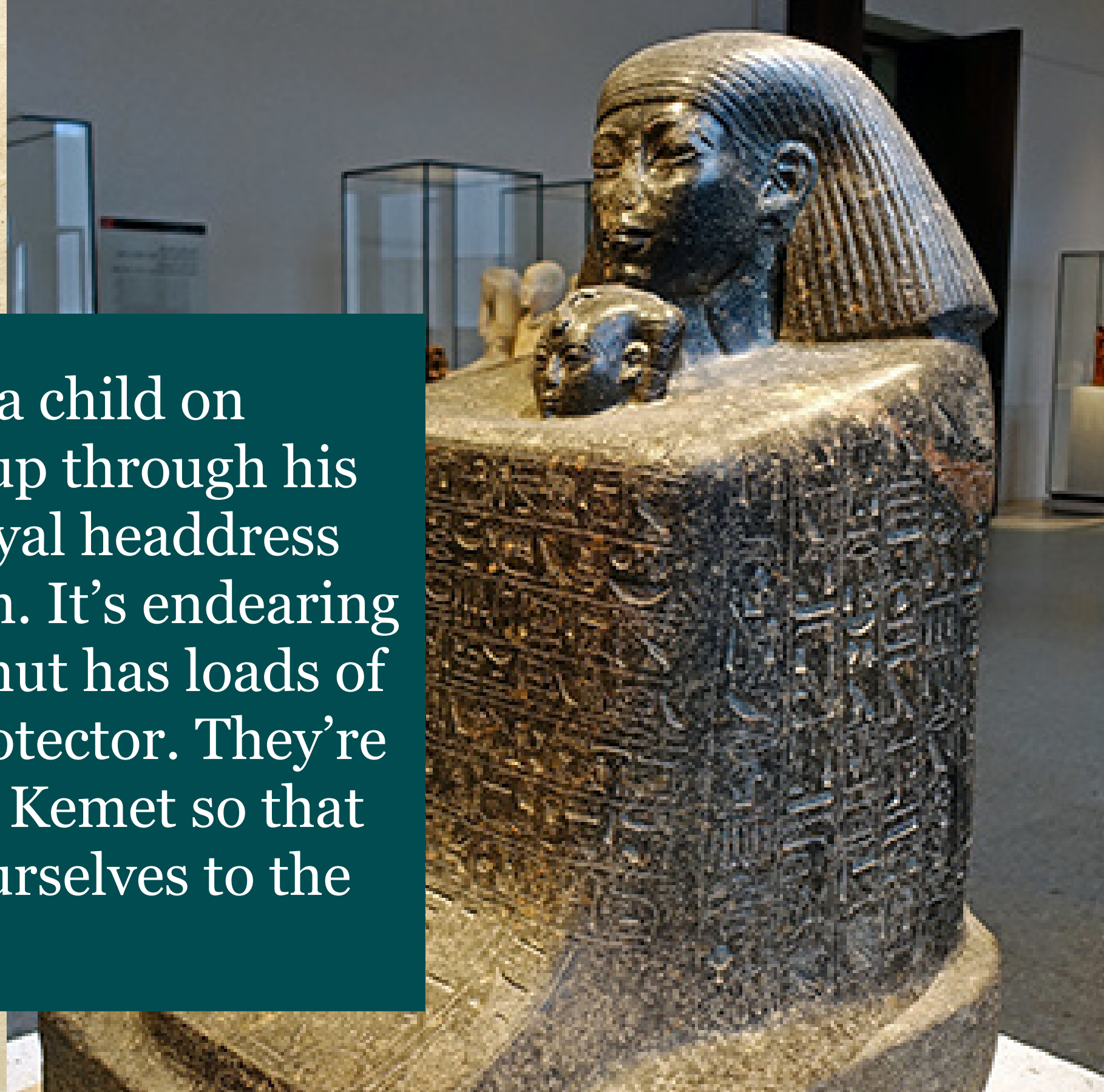
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The nefer symbol, the heart and trachea, the root of my name, which means good or beautiful, repeats itself again and again in thick rows. It fits my neck perfectly. I wear it on days when I need an extra dose of confidence.



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It's a new statue of me as a child on Senenmut's lap, head poking up through his cloak so that the top of my royal headdress rests comfortably under his chin. It's endearing but hardly unexpected. Senenmut has loads of statues depicting him as my protector. They're housed in temples throughout Kemet so that we're constantly dedicating ourselves to the gods.



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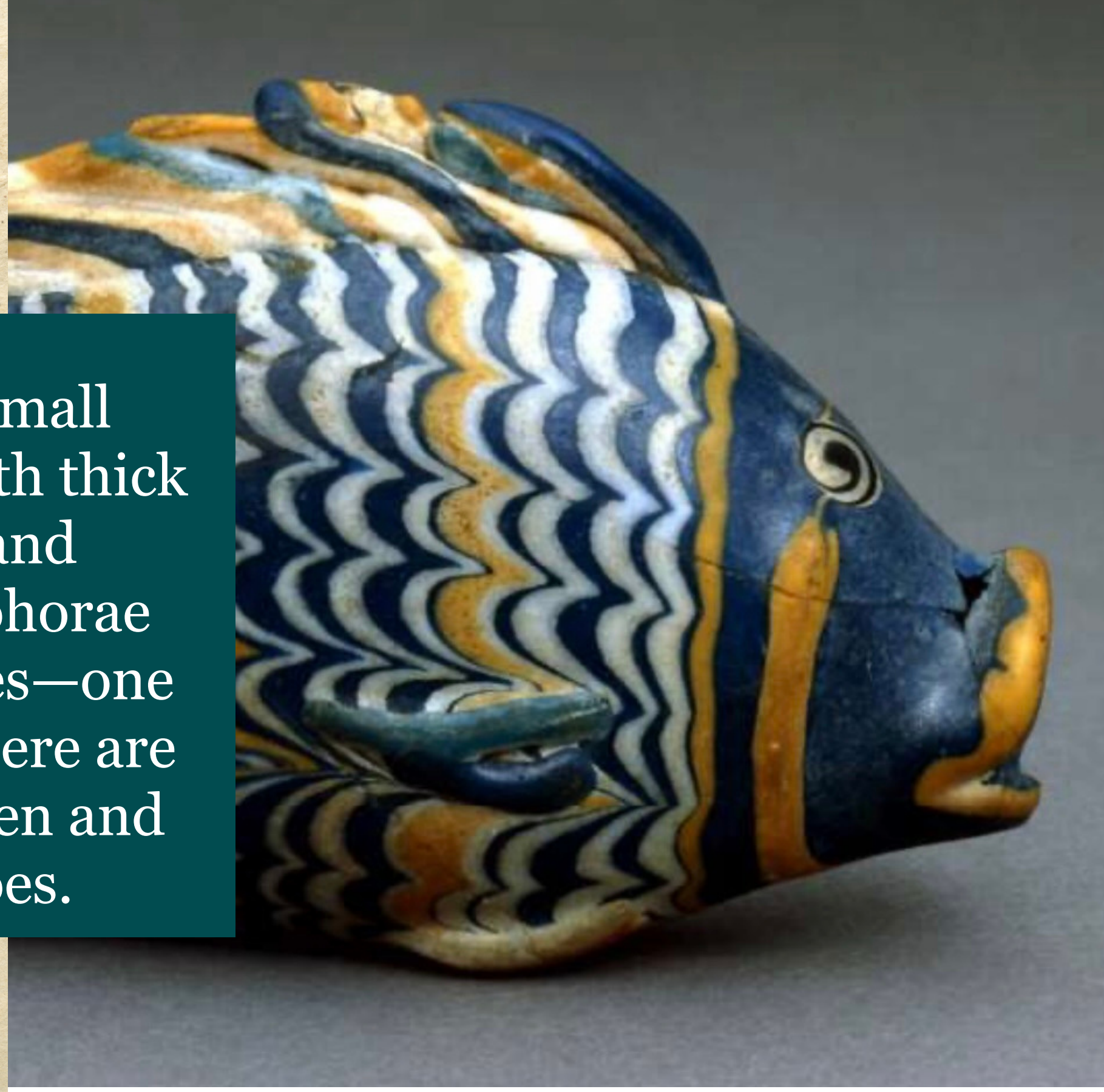
"Your headrest is inscribed with the proper spells, yes?"

“Of course,” I promise. My headrest is carved of acacia. It’s covered in protection symbols, and an inscription ensuring my dreams are peaceful runs its length. It works fine. Usually.



“

There must be hundreds of small nooks and crannies bursting with thick glass jars, alabaster vases, and ointment jars shaped like amphorae and pitchers, some with handles—one or two—and others without. There are pottery vases shaped like women and monkeys and fish and scribes.



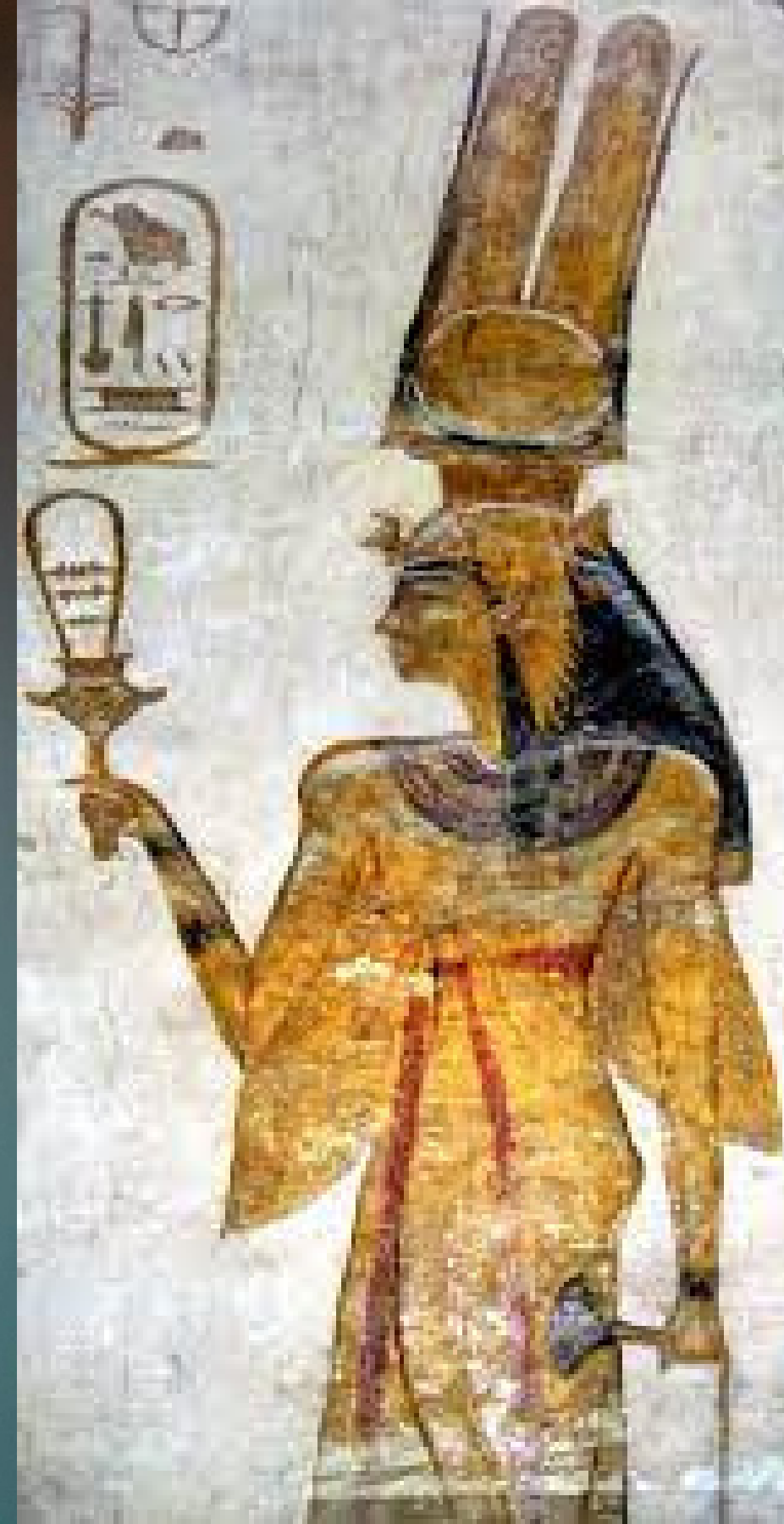
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Everything about this space,
from its construction to the scenes
that cover the walls to the plants that
blossom around it, is designed to
remind the people that Mother
was chosen by the gods.



“

I force my arm to lift the sistrum high,
willing the instrument to create
Amun's favorite rhythms. I breathe in
the smell of incense and the cooked
meat sitting at the god's feet and call
the movements to me.



“

She holds the counterweight of a menat necklace in her hand. The long, beaded faience strings dangle down to bunch on her thighs. Perhaps she clutches it tight for luck—it amuses me to believe the clever wisewoman can't swim.



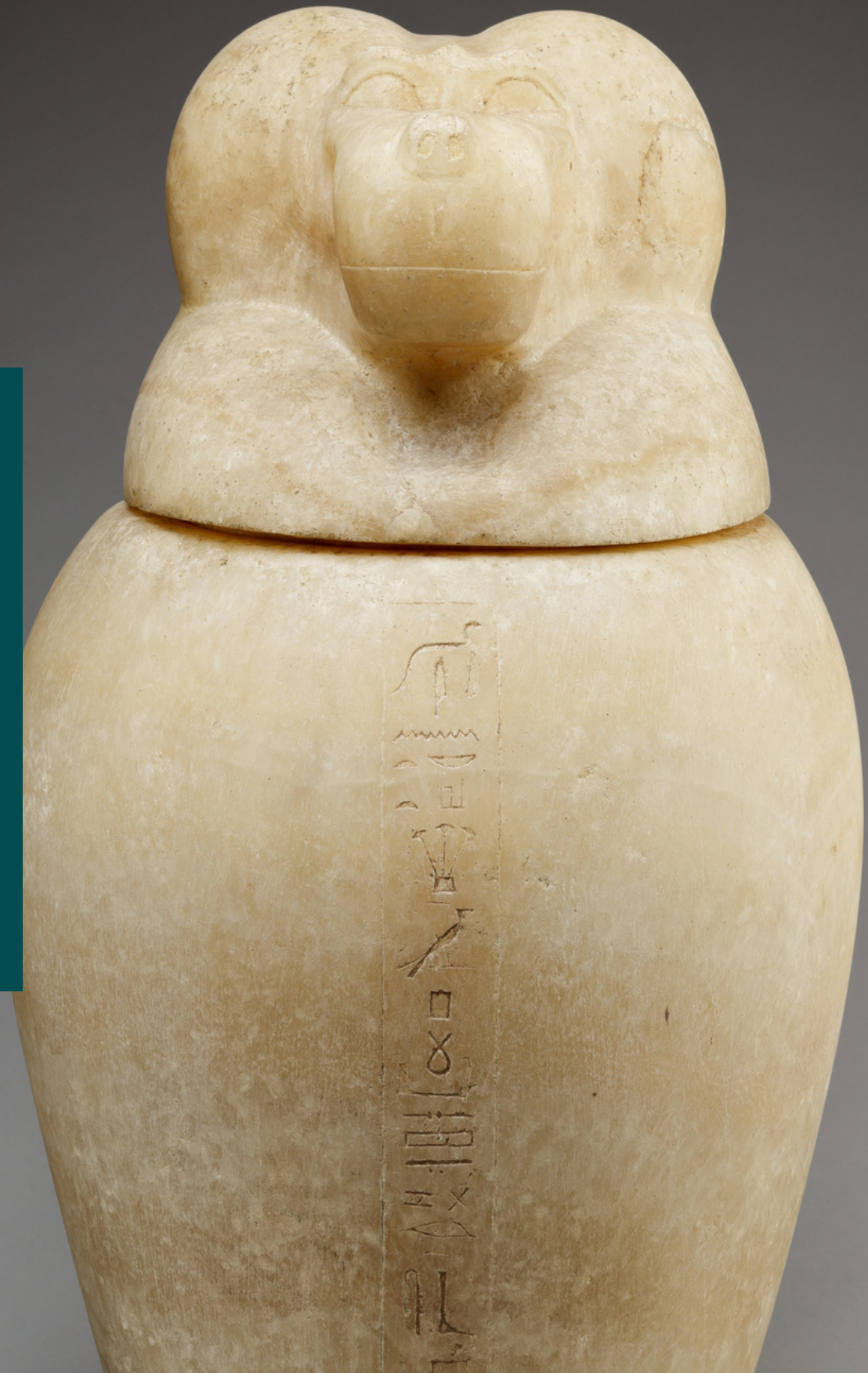
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I lean back, studying her round cheeks and narrow eyes, the short wig that hugs her head, the large gold heart scarab amulet dangling from her fleshy neck. It rests above her heart. If I flipped it over, I'd find a spell from the Book of the Dead reminding Benerib's heart to be silent when she stands before Osiris to be judged.



“

My fellow countrymen would rejoice to know their innards were destined for such vaulted containers. But I'm not sure I care whether my lungs and liver end up in stone or porcelain.



“

Benerib holds up an intricately beaded tunic with small faience and gold beads that form large ankh signs around the skirt and sleeves. “Iset sent it today,” she says. “It’s a bit heavy. But she thought it would look lovely with your dark hair.”



“

A slow dirge of music floats on the breeze, punctured by sounds of laughing nobles. I pause and listen to the words of the blind harpist, struck by his message: make the most of today, for tomorrow is not guaranteed.

