

THE ARCHEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF INSCRIBED EGYPTIAN FUNERARY CONES.*

by Donald P. Ryan

A common component of collections of Egyptian antiquities throughout the world are fired clay objects bearing stamped funerary texts. These objects are often conical shaped and are generally referred to as "funerary cones". The texts typically bear the name and titles of a deceased personage, often with additional biographical data and epitaphs. The texts, then, provide a wealth of information concerning a variety of different individuals, their occupations, genealogy, etc. The temporal/spatial distribution of these objects appears restricted to the Theban area between the 18th to 26th Dynasties.

In 1885, the first systematic corpus of the stamped texts was published as compiled by Wiedemann. Another by Daressy followed in 1893. A corpus of facsimiles compiled by Davies and Macadam was published in 1957 and provides the key reference source for the study of these texts today, while new examples appear in the literature from time to time.¹ The purpose of this paper is to slightly revise the thinking regarding these fascinating objects, from an archaeological viewpoint. Without wishing to discount the wonderful information that can be derived from the texts found upon these objects, it should be pointed out that few publications have gone beyond the commentary of the texts to consider the objects as a whole. In the Egyptological literature, a funerary cone usually seems to equal a hunk of fired clay with a Davies/Macadam Corpus number.

A more careful look at these objects demonstrates that extensive physical variation exists which the word "cone" does not express. Indeed, such a categorization of all clay objects bearing these stamped funerary texts has served to blur their distinctions. We can note that these so-called "cones" are often rectangular, wedge-shaped, flat and bell-shaped,² and possess a wide range of variation in terms of length, width, and thickness. There even exists at least one example of a double-headed cone.³ The objects survive in a variety of colors, many are painted, and some are even hollow. Some of the objects bear stamps on more than one side. The use of the word "cone", then, suggests a uniformity between the objects which hinders their complete consideration. Noting this problem, I would like to offer a few suggestions toward a more holistic analysis of these objects.

1) First, rather than referring to the stamped texts as "cone texts", they are perhaps best referred to as "funerary stamps", as the same stamp may appear on a variety of objects of different shape. Realistically, the use of the word "cone" is likely to persist as it is firmly entrenched within the vocabulary and literature of the Egyptologist. A realization of a broader meaning for this term, then, is required if it is to be accurately perpetuated.

2) In 1934, Borchardt, Königsberger, and Ricke noted a variety of shapes and proposed that these objects served as frieze elements once situated on the facades of Theban tombs. Two 19th century observations of these objects seen in-situ in such a context, and an archaeologically recorded example of 11th Dynasty uninscribed objects in-situ, provide strong evidence toward this conclusion.⁴

Additionally, friezes of funerary stamps seem to appear in certain Theban tomb scenes which apparently depict external views of intact tombs.⁵ If we make the assumption that the proposition of tomb friezes is indeed correct, then it might be reasonable to assume that all objects bearing the same stamp constitute an archaeological assemblage. These assemblages, in many cases, are presently dispersed around the world. A consideration of these assemblages may eventually provide considerable information concerning external tomb

architecture, function in terms of shape, and many other questions.

Archaeologically there is a vital need to study the object as a whole. If one looks past the inscription, a wide degree of variation is evident as noted previously. An archaeological approach would ask such questions as how do the objects with the same stamp differ and how are they the same? What variation exists between such objects, cone-shaped or otherwise, which bear different funerary stamps? How many? In archaeological terms, then, we are interested in the analysis of intra- and inter- assemblage variation.

3) Many archaeologists tend to intimately study even the most subtle of variations in pottery vessels, yet these clay funerary objects have received no such attention. Many collections contain these objects in the form of their stamped ends, the remainder of the clay having been sawn or broken off to reduce the inconvenience of bulk and weight. The relatively aesthetically unattractive part of the objects, then, has often been sacrificed by those blinded by the allure of texts. Petrie himself, though generally an outstanding archaeologist, freely admitted to his participation in this mutilating practice:

"as the inscriptions are all that is really required, the bulk of the cone was removed, either by sawing, if soft, or breaking, if hard. Thus with a very small loss, I reduced a collection of over 250 to a more manageable bulk. "6

Nevertheless, complete objects can be found in many collections and even the broken ones can provide significant data.⁷ Much of the analytical criteria applied to the physical analysis of ceramic vessels is certainly appropriate to the analysis of clay funerary-stamped objects. Material and mode of manufacture, size and shape, and coloration serve as broad analytical categories.

Conclusion:

In short, I advocate that:

- a) the texts be more properly referred to as "funerary stamps" in order to help avoid the categorical homogenization of the physical objects themselves;
- b) assuming that the stamped elements are components of tomb friezes, objects bearing the same stamps might be considered an archaeological assemblage;
- c) the archaeological study of intra- and inter- assemblage variation should provide interesting results in the future.

Notes:

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1 A summary of additions to the Davies/Macadam Corpus is found in Martin and Reeves (1987 p.64).

2 A variety of differently shaped objects bearing funerary stamps are illustrated in Borchardt, Königsberger, and Ricke (1934 p.28, Abb.8).

3 This interesting object resides in the Hunterian Museum, Glasgow (D.1925.63).

4 See Reeves and Ryan (1987).

5 Davies (1938).

6 (1988 p.23).

7 A recent publication on a large collection of "cones" by Stewart (1986) admirably describes the condition of the objects, e.g. "stamp only", "damaged", "complete". Stewart also notes the measurements of complete cones.

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