



P R A G U E E G Y P T O L O G I C A L S T U D I E S

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Mastaba of Queen
Khentkaus III
in Abusir

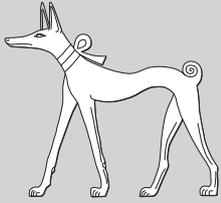


Tomb of the chief
physician
Shepseskafankh

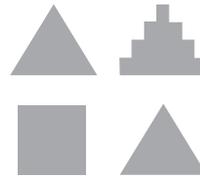
The miraculous
rise of the Fifth
Dynasty



Old Kingdom
canopic jars from
new perspective



P R A G U E EGYPTOLOGICAL S T U D I E S



XV / 2015
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Photograph on the front page

A reconstruction of the offering place in front of the false door of Nefer in tomb AS 68d (photo M. Frouz)

Dear readers,

It has been thirteen years since the first issue of *Prague Egyptological Studies* was published in 2002. Since then it has become an important and wide-selling journal, providing both the scientific and laymen audience with the latest results of our fieldwork and various studies in the field of Czech Egyptology dealing with the civilisations of ancient Egypt and Sudan.

After more than a decade of its existence, we are pleased to launch the first issue of the English edition of *Prague Egyptological Studies*. The English edition is dedicated exclusively to the history, archaeology and language of third millennium BC Egypt. Yet it also aims to include studies dealing with foreign relations during the period. At the same time, we also welcome publications on the latest advances in the study of the environment and studies evaluating the significance of applied sciences. Our principal aim is to accommodate studies concerning either primary research in the field or those that bring up theoretical inquiries of essential importance to the indicated scope and time frame of the journal.

The present issue is devoted to the excavations at Abusir, the principal field of research of the Czech Institute of Egyptology. The individual reports are dedicated to the excavation projects carried out in the pyramid field (Khentkaus III), as well as in the Abusir South area (tomb complex AS 68, the tomb of Shepseskafankh). In addition to these, you will also find more theoretical studies focusing on the "Khentkaus problem", which analyses the significance and importance of three women bearing the same name during the Fourth and Fifth Dynasties, a study dealing with model beer jars and their typological evolution, an interesting seal with a figure of Bes, and an interpretation of canopic jars bearing significant tokens of past treatment on their bodies.

We trust that the English edition of *Prague Egyptological Studies*, which will be produced once a year, will find a firm place among other Egyptological scholarly journals. We are convinced that a clearly defined profile of this scientific journal will attract not only the attention of many readers but also submissions of significant contributions from the scientific community and thus streamline major advances in the fields of third millennium BC Egypt history, archaeology and the like.

Miroslav Bárta and Lucie Jirásková

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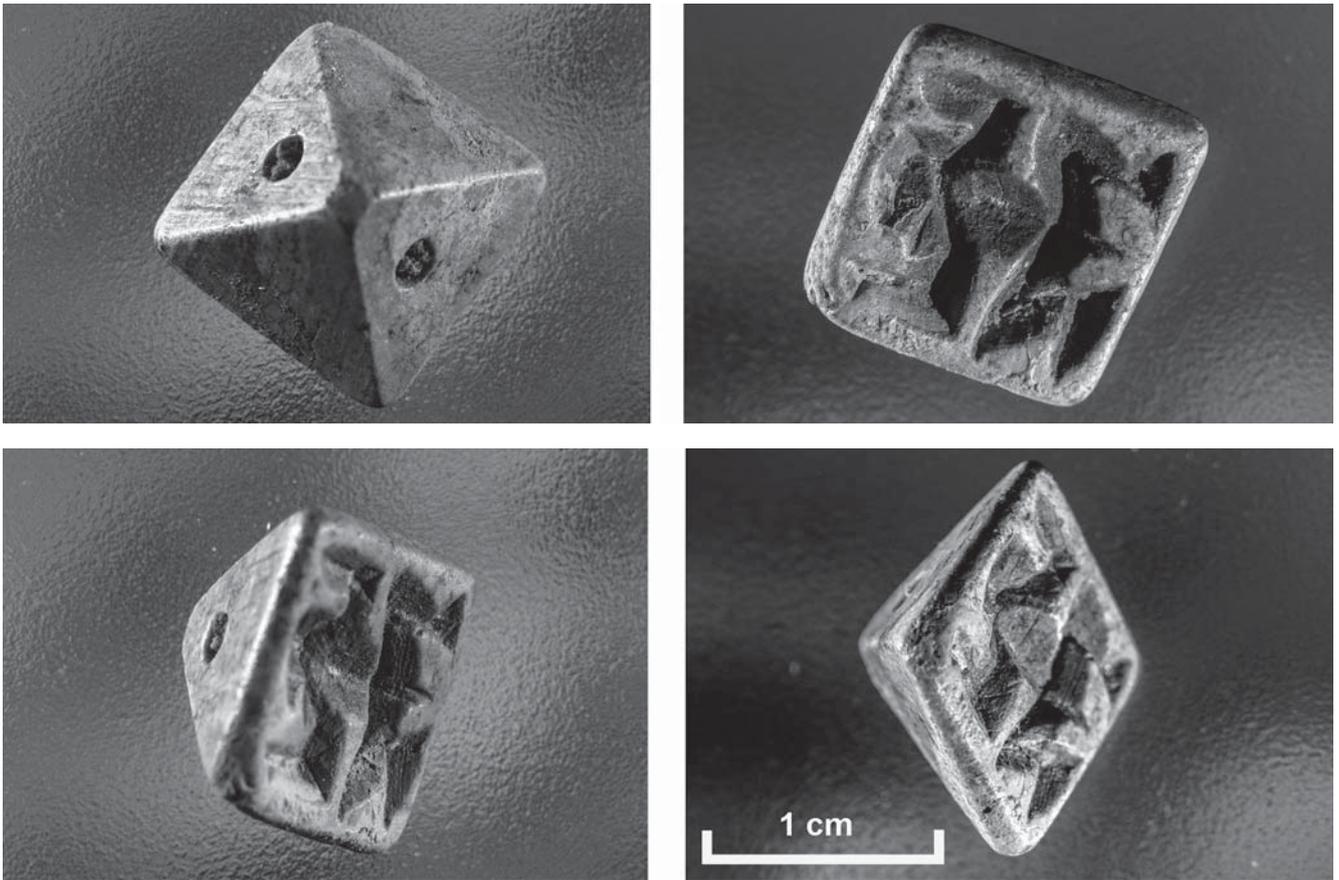


Fig. 1 A pyramid-shaped amulet seal from a female burial in Abusir South (photo M. Frouz)

A burial with a stamp seal depicting a Bes-like figure from Abusir

Veronika Dulíková – Martin Odler – Helena Březinová – Petra Havelková

The stone mastaba (AS 65) of the chief physician Neferherptah was excavated at Abusir South in the autumn of 2010.¹ An intact humble burial in a reed coffin positioned directly on the superstructure of Neferherptah's tomb, probably built during the late Fifth Dynasty, was unearthed (figs. 2 and 3). The burial contained a pyramidal stamp seal with a Bes-shaped figure on its base. It thus represents the first documented primary archaeological context of the stamp seal at the Memphite necropolis. Regrettably, evaluation of the material was influenced by external factors, *i.e.* the Egyptian revolution in 2011 and partial looting of the Czech magazines, during which some of the finds were lost or destroyed.²

The burial (5/AS65/2010)

The reed coffin was situated above the southern wall of Neferherptah's mastaba, at the southwestern corner of the superstructure. The pit for the coffin was dug out in a layer of compact debris and limestone chips (fig. 2), and the longer axis of the coffin was oriented roughly in a north-south direction. This rectangular coffin (165 × 55–60 cm) of dark brown colour was quite well preserved, and was most probably made from the reed species *Arundo donax*.³ The lid of the coffin was formed from a simple mat of the

same material. The shorter sides of the coffin were made by bending the reed stalks. The reeds were not bound.

The deceased was placed in a crouched position. The head was most probably not in the original location, but it had drooped down southwards from the mud brick in the coffin. The light brown mud brick (13 × 10 × 8–9.50 cm) was apparently used as a headrest (fig. 4). The face of the deceased was originally looking east, arms bent at the elbows. The fingers of the left hand were situated under the mud brick, while the right hand was placed in front of the face (fig. 3).

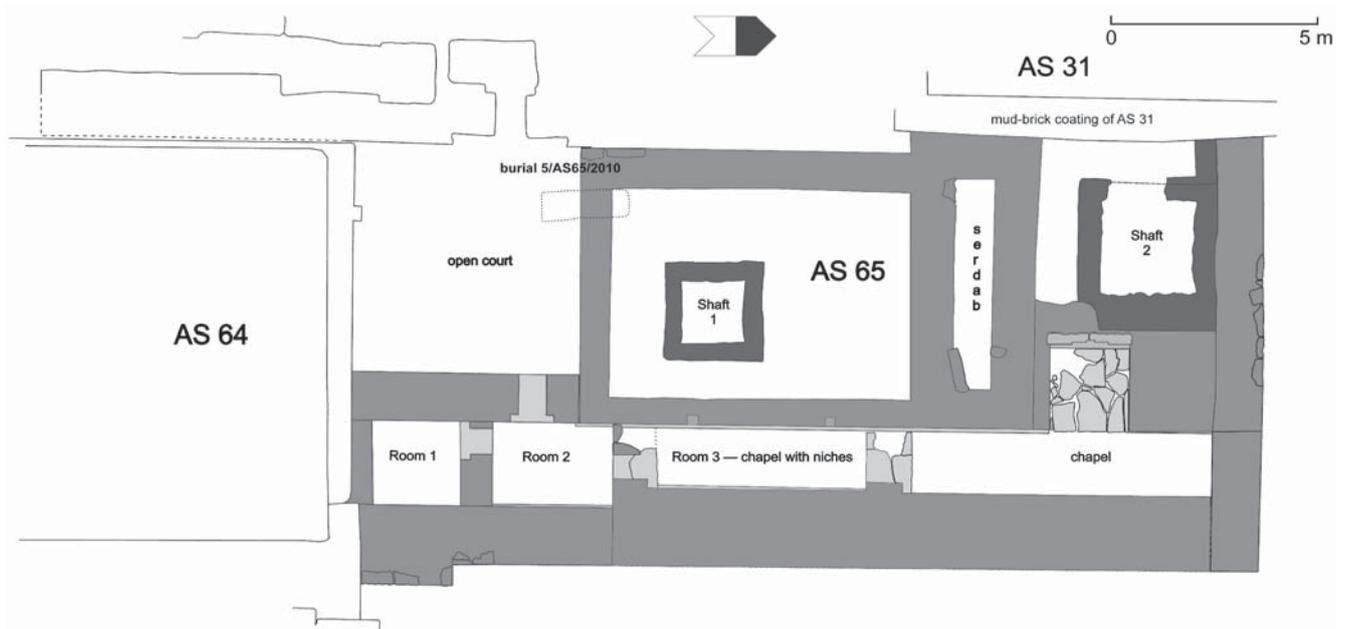


Fig. 2 A plan of the mastaba of chief physician Neferherptah (AS 65). The position of the burial with a stamp seal in a reed coffin is indicated (5/AS65/2010) (drawing M. Odler)

Eight different fragments of textile were found together with the burial and these will be discussed below. Two eroded fragments of Old Kingdom pottery were also present, but were most probably not an intentional part of the burial. Several ecofactual remains were found in the

fill of the coffin. Four complete shells and several fragments of these were in the coffin fill, but all were destroyed during the looting of the Czech magazines in January 2011, and thus the shells types were not determined. In the area around the skeleton's pelvis,

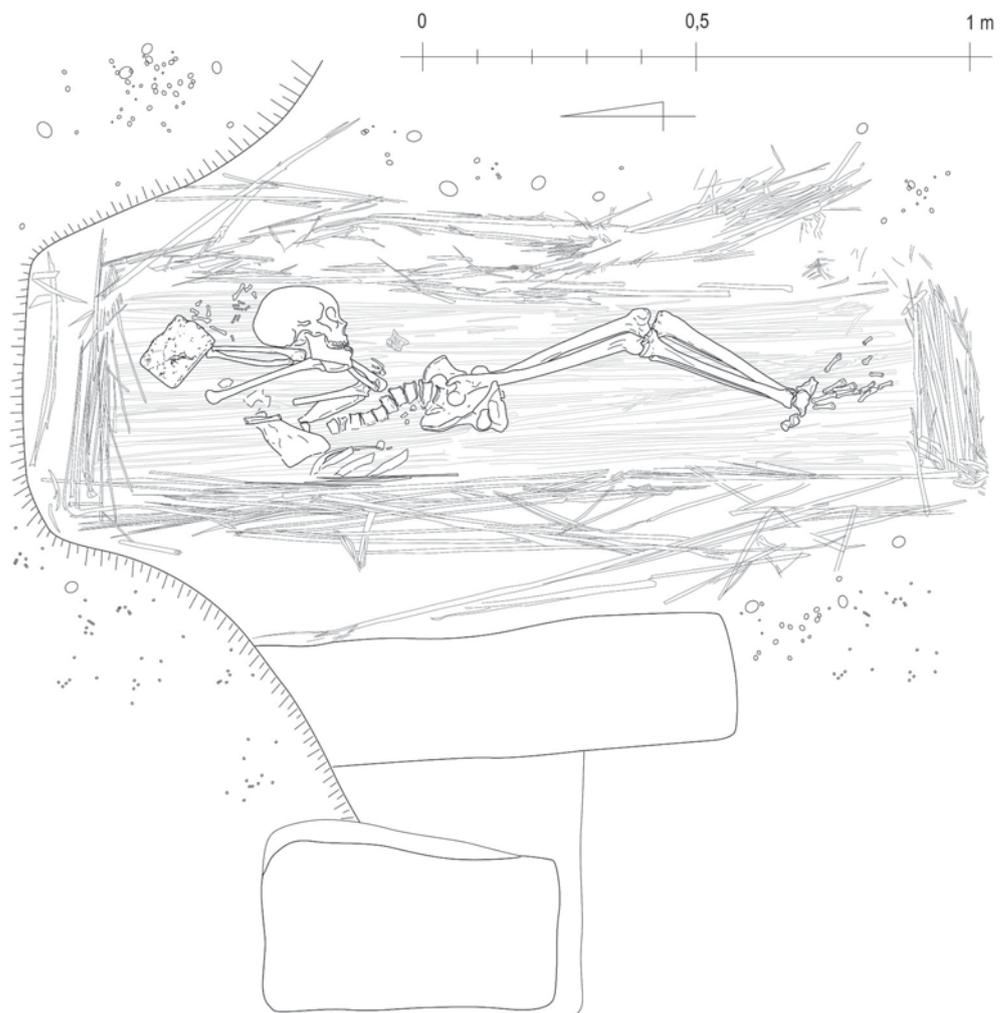


Fig. 3 An intact female burial in a reed coffin (5a/AS65/2010) (drawing J. Malátková)

a beetle was found which was identified as a darkling beetle, family Tenebrionidae, genus *Scaurus* (fig. 5). More precise identification is not possible. *Scaurus* is common in semi-arid areas, feeding on dry or decaying plants.⁴ It is obvious that the beetle had no direct connection with the burial and that it could have been carried together with the coffin plant material to the burial place in the desert.

The archaeological context of the burial

Burials in reed coffins are relatively common during the Sixth Dynasty and early First Intermediate Period in the Saqqara North. In the area excavated and published exceptionally well by Polish archaeologists, ca. 36 % of all burials at the Upper Necropolis in the late Old Kingdom were interred in reed coffins (Kowalska 2013). The reed coffin from Abusir falls into the second category as defined by Myśliwiec (2011: 305), with a burial pit dug out in the debris and the coffin of weaker construction, without any binding material. The practice of bending longer stems to make the shorter sides of a coffin has also been attested at Saqqara (Kowalska 2013: 429).

A female burial in a reed coffin was likewise found at the Dakhla Oasis, datable to the end of the Old Kingdom and the beginning of the First Intermediate Period (Castel –

Pantalacci 2005: 176–177). Reed coffins have also been found at some burial grounds in the Qau district. Four burials at Mostagedda (Brunton 1937: nos. 2644, 2618, 2901 and 2908) contained reed receptacle for the body and were dated to the Sixth Dynasty and early First Intermediate Period (Seidlmayer 1990: 133–139). The burial 2168 contained a pyramid seal-amulet as well, together with beads (Brunton 1948: 98). Eleven burials had reed coffins at the Qau cemeteries (Brunton 1927: 47), three of which (nos. 677, 1141, 5535) were dated to the Sixth Dynasty (Seidlmayer 1990: 133–139).

Mud bricks or rough stone blocks beneath the head of the dead were usually found in the poorest burials at the Memphite necropolis, e.g. at Giza (Roehrig 1992: 78; for an unpublished burial in mastaba G 2045a, Shaft F, see www.gizapyramids.org). Eight burials with mud brick as headrests were attested at the Qau cemeteries (Brunton 1928: 106), three of which (nos. 4806, 4842, 4866) were dated to the First Intermediate Period (Seidlmayer 1991: 133–139). The position of the body in the burial from Abusir was as if in a sleep, thus showing that death was regarded as a form of sleeping. This interpretation of death preceded more theoretical and complex concepts of the afterlife, gradually spreading in the ancient Egyptian

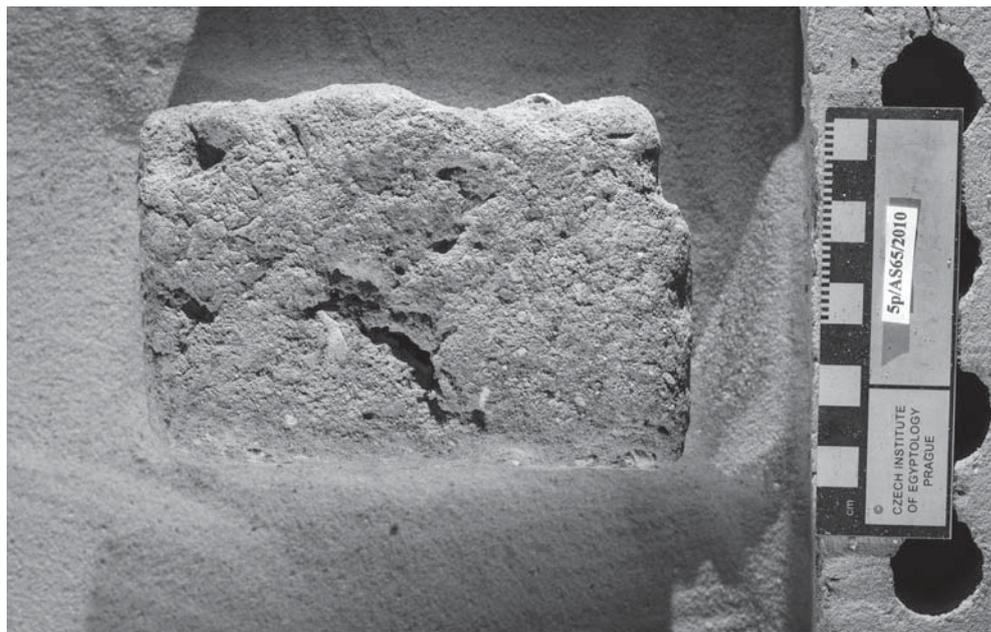


Fig. 4 A mud brick used as a headrest (5p/AS65/2010) (photo M. Frouz)

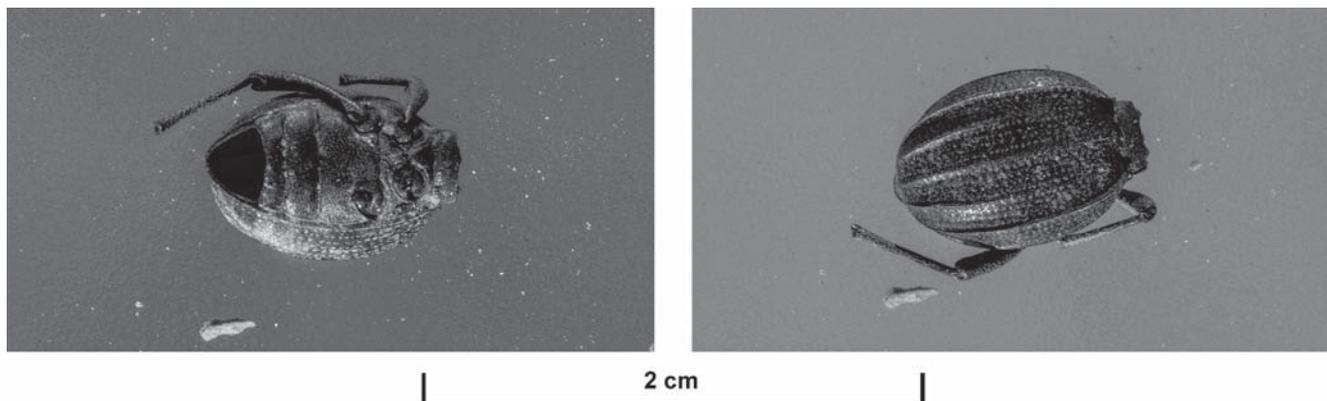


Fig. 5 A darkling beetle of family Tenebrionidae and genus *Scaurus* (5e/AS65/2010) was found in the area of the woman's pelvis; the beetle had probably been moved together with the coffin plant material to the burial place in the desert (photo M. Frouz)

society down to the Middle Kingdom (for a further interpretation, see Seidlmayer 2001: 223–230 and Willems 2014: 135–136).

The burial from Abusir, even in comparison to similar interments, appears to be one of the most humble of burials. The reed coffin and the mud brick used as a headrest provide some chronological hints. Concerning the dating and the context of the burial, however, the most important find was found on the breastbone of the skeleton.

Pyramidal stamp seal

The pyramid-shaped amulet seal found on the breastbone of the deceased has a square base with a side dimension of 1.10 cm (figs. 1 and 6). It was made of enstatite and blue-greenish glazed. The stamp seal was originally suspended from a cord, from which only a small piece in the drilled hole survived, and it was worn as a pendant. A schematically rendered frontal attitude of a dancing-like, robust figure with arms raised upwards, legs bent, feet turned out, animal tail (or phallus) and perhaps the ears of a feline animal is engraved on the seal base. The figure probably represents the god Bes or a deity or daemon of similar nature (Altenmüller 1965: 152–156; Romano 1980 and 1989: 8–9; Dasen 2013: 55–83). However, a direct connection of the name Bes with his iconographical expression is only attested much later, in the Third Intermediate Period (see *e.g.* Altenmüller 2004: 68), even though his depictions appeared earlier. An incision in the area of the left cheek gives the impression of a protruding tongue or of an ape head in profile (sometimes the appearance of Bes mingles with that of monkeys, see Dasen 2013: 62).

Bes was a protector of ancient Egyptian women, children and households; he drove away evil influences and he guarded people during sleep. Bes also contributed to the rebirth of the dead and protected the body as well (Romano 1989: 20; Dasen 2013: 67–80). The amulet had an apparently apotropaic function, serving as a protection of the humble woman in overcoming obstacles before reaching the world beyond. And it was possibly a reference to a kind of *rite de passage* to the netherworld (for the Old Kingdom burials as *rites de passage* see Rzeuska 2008).

The majority of stamp seals come from the necropoleis of provincial capitals in Upper Egypt such as Qau, Matmar and Mostagedda (for catalogues see Petrie 1925; Brunton 1948; Dubiel 2008; for a map with a spatial distribution throughout Egypt see Wiese 1996: 38, Abb. 5). However, the oldest attestation in the provinces might depend only on the preserved archaeological contexts (Grajetzki 2003: 31). In most cases, poor countrymen or town inhabitants were buried with this type of burial equipment in a shallow pit or shaft burials from the beginning of the Sixth Dynasty to the outset of the Middle Kingdom. Thus, the stamp seals stood for a development stage between the cylindrical seals used from the Predynastic Period onwards and scarabs occurring from the Twelfth Dynasty (Wiese 1996: 1, 11).

During three hundred years, stamp seals underwent miscellaneous changes in both shape and representation, which allow rather reliable dating. Hitherto known pyramid-shaped amulet seals with the incised figure of Bes are of unknown provenance. On the basis of the analysis of the shape (according to Wiese Type SF–BB3) and the figurative

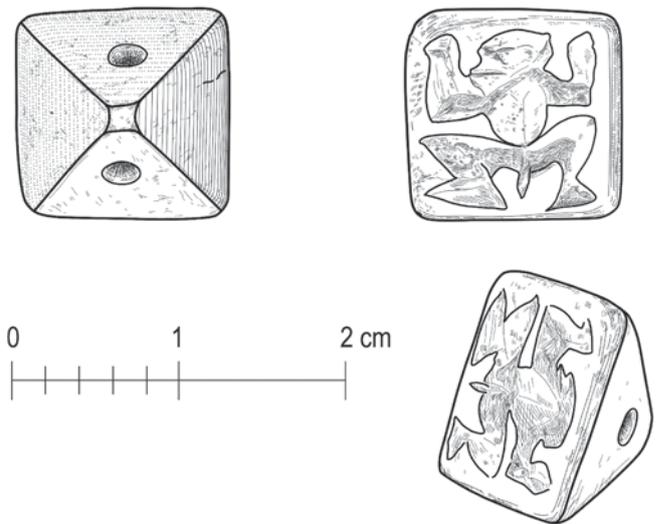


Fig. 6 The stamp seal with a figure representing a Bes-like god or a monkey (5I/AS65/2010) (drawing J. Malátková)

motif (SM–F), these seals mostly fall into the Sixth Dynasty (see Wiese 1996: Taf. 2, nos. 19 and 20). It corresponds with Ward's chronology for the development of the back-forms of stamp seals. According to him, the series of amulets begins with pyramid-back seals and these appear most commonly in the late Old Kingdom (Ward 1970: 77, 80).

The Abusir find newly added to the corpus of stamp seals represents the first amulet of this type coming from a documented primary archaeological context. Although this tiny find is small in size, it is of particular importance for studying burial customs and the beliefs of lower social strata in the Memphite necropolis. Five other amulet seals were found at Abusir, unfortunately out of primary archaeological context. All of them were made of limestone with roughly incised decoration. Two rounded amulets were found in the surface layer of wind-blown sand, south of the mastaba of the sun priest Neferinpu (Bárta *et al.* 2014: 106–107). A yet unpublished amulet with similar decoration (4/LL/2002) came from the nearby anonymous tomb, AS 32. These amulets are dated, according to the analogies, to the late Sixth Dynasty or to the First Intermediate Period. Two limestone oval stamp seals with shank-backs were found on the floor level of the temple in the pyramid complex Lepsius no. 24, one uninscribed, another with unclear incised signs, both probably dated to the late Sixth Dynasty or to the First Intermediate Period (Krejčí *et al.* 2008: 131, Fig. 4.93). These seals most probably accompanied burials, however, they were found in secondary and tertiary archaeological contexts. More burials of the late Old Kingdom and First Intermediate Period are expected in the area of the Abusir necropolis, but they could be disturbed or destroyed by later activity at the site. The female burial (5/AS65/2010) over Neferherptah's tomb (AS 65) is so far the only documented example of an intact burial.

The skeleton

An almost complete skeleton (5a/AS65/2010) suffered from looting at Abusir in 2011. Only the postcranial skeleton survived and the skull was lost. Determinations based on the pelvic bones suggested this individual was

a female, more than fifty years old (Brůžek 2002; Murail *et al.* 2005; Schmitt 2005; Ubelaker 1978) and approximately 150 cm tall (Raxter *et al.* 2008). No signs of a pathological case were observed, with the exception of the bony ankylosis of two thoracic vertebrae (Th3-4) (fig. 7). With regard to the character of the fusion – the vertebral bodies as well as the spinous processes were fused – congenital aetiology could not be excluded (Vyhnánek – Stloukal 1985). As only two vertebrae were fused, this state had no clinical symptoms and did not affect the woman during her life. Apart from basic anthropological characteristics, changes at the attachment sites of the muscles and ligaments – so called enthesal changes or enthesopathies (Jurmain – Villotte 2010; Villotte 2009) – were evaluated as well. Almost all muscle attachment sites of the studied skeleton showed slight changes which may reflect the degree of physical stress during the life of this woman. The most affected entheses were recorded in the area of the upper limb, especially at the elbow joint and forearm. Whereas the presence of enthesal changes in young adult individuals can be used to reconstruct their habitual activity, their occurrence may increase in advanced age without a direct link to mechanical stress. Nonetheless, the bones of this female show a higher occurrence of enthesal changes in comparison with the skeletal remains of other individuals more than fifty years old from Abusir South.

Textile remains of body wrapping

The remains of eight different types of fabric were found together with the female burial, along the whole body of the deceased. All the textiles feature a plain weave of flax spun left in S-spun threads. Above the femur, a fragment of the dense textile with a well-preserved solid side selvedge was found (fig. 8), with a warp density much higher (34–36 threads / 10 mm) than the weft density



Fig. 7 A congenital fusion of the third and fourth thoracic vertebrae (5a/AS65/2010) (photo P. Havelková)

(8 threads / 10 mm); the threads are 0.30–0.40 thick. In the area of the upper limbs, the remains of three fabrics were identified. Two of them are only tiny fragments, while the third one is preserved as a cluster of many tiny fragments. All these fabrics were quite sparse, with the thread density ranges being from 22 to 30 threads / 10 mm in the warp and from 10 to 12 threads / 10 mm in the weft; the threads are 0.20–0.40 mm thick. In the area of the pelvis and chest, two different textiles in very tiny and badly-preserved fragments were found. The structure of these is not obvious, partly because of the state of preservation and partly due to the occurrence of a dark substance (probably embalming agent) which spread through the textile structure. In the proximity of the skull, two different fabrics were found, one in the form of a tiny scrap of dense textile and the other in narrow stripes of fabric, about 20 mm in width and

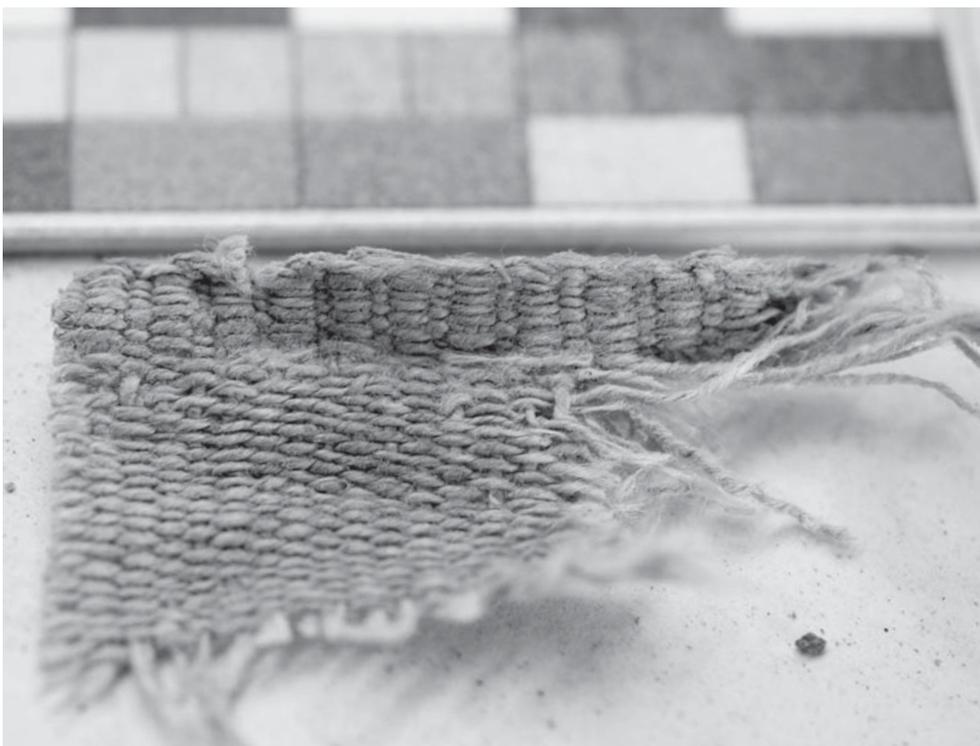


Fig. 8 A fragment of the fabric with the well-preserved solid side selvedge (5d/AS65/2010, fabric E) (photo H. Březinová)

70–100 mm long, arranged in several layers. This dense fabric features a great number of threads in the warp higher density (40 threads / 10 mm) and a low density in the weft (16 threads / 10 mm); the threads are 0.25–0.30 mm thick. The superimposed fabric has a balanced number of threads in both systems, 24–28 threads / 10 mm in the warp, 16 threads / 10 mm in the weft; these very finely spun threads are 0.20–0.25 mm thick.

The large number of various textiles identified on the remains of the buried individual probably comes from the textile wrapping of the deceased body. The state of preservation of the individual textiles in the form of a few tiny fragments does not allow any description of the bandaging type; however, it indicates the utilization of various fabrics of different quality for the wrapping of the individual parts of the body.

Conclusions

The burial of the old woman is very humble, compared to the Sixth Dynasty and First Intermediate Period burials in the small tombs found in the vicinity of the Fifth Dynasty pyramids at Abusir (Schäfer 1908). The form, equipment and place of the burial have revealed that the woman with the amulet-like seal obviously belonged among individuals of lowest social status and carried out rather strenuous physical activities which can be specified only on the basis of enthesal changes. The Bes-like image engraved on her pyramid-shaped stamp seal represents the only example of this kind that has been documented in a primary archaeological context and simultaneously the sole amulet of this type and decoration from the Memphite necropolis. This would provide one of the earliest pieces of iconographical evidence for the archetype of the god later known as Bes.

Although this modest woman could afford not but a humble burial, she was interred in the immediate proximity of high-ranking officials buried in Old Kingdom mastabas. She was buried in the superstructure of the stone built mastaba of the chief physician Neferherptah. Obviously, the funerary cult of the physician was not taking place and the mastaba itself was not in use at that time. It is not known how much of his tomb was visible during the time of the woman's burial, as the excavations uncovering the tomb found no traces of the tomb roofing. Such a burial fashion in a shallow hole below the desert surface did not allow for the construction of any cultic place for her funerary cult nor the bringing of offerings. What influenced the woman's choice of her burial place seemingly outside the burial site of her family or people of similar social status? A connection between the physician, Neferherptah, and this woman cannot be excluded. Perhaps his profession could have played a role. Or was the choice of the burial place merely coincidental?

Notes:

¹ A preliminary report in Czech, with an English summary, was published by Dulíková – Odler – Havelková (2011).

² A short report on looting at Abusir in English was published by Odler – Dulíková – Juříčková (2013). Regarding the burial (5/AS65/2010) under

scrutiny, the skull (5a/AS65/2010), stamp seal (5l/AS65/2010) and shells have been lost.

³ We would like to thank botanist Adéla Pokorná (Department of Botany, Charles University in Prague) for her determination of the plant species.

⁴ We are indebted to entomologist Aleš Bezděk (Institute of Entomology, Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, České Budějovice) for the consultation on and determination of the beetle species.

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Abstract:

In the autumn of 2010, a humble intact burial in a reed coffin was found during the excavation of the Old Kingdom stone mastaba of the chief physician Neferherptah (AS 65) at Abusir South. The burial was positioned directly on the superstructure of Neferherptah’s tomb. The body of a more than fifty-year-old woman had been wrapped in linen, as indicated by eight fragments of fabric. The only burial equipment of the deceased consisted of a mud brick used as a headrest and a pyramidal stamp seal with a Bes-shaped figure on its base found on the breastbone.

This latest addition to the corpus of stamp seals represents the first amulet of its type to come from a documented primary archaeological context at the Memphite necropolis. Although this tiny find is small in size, it is of particular importance for the study of the burial customs and beliefs of the lower social strata in the Memphite necropolis. The seal most probably provides one of the earliest examples of iconographical evidence for the archetype of the god later known as Bes.

Some of the archaeological material from the excavations was destroyed during the Egyptian revolution in 2011. The remaining material is examined in this paper, together with an anthropological and textile report.

Abusir – Old Kingdom – First Intermediate Period – stamp seal – amulet – Bes – reed coffin – entheses

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