

University Eötvös Loránd
Faculty of Humanities

Hypocephali
Thesis of the Dissertation

By Tamás Mekis

Doctoral School of History
Head of the School: Dr. Gábor Székely, DSc

Egyptology Program
Head of the Program: Dr. habil. Tamás Bács, Ph.D.

Primary advisor:
Dr. Schreiber Gábor, Ph.D.

Budapest, 2013

1. Definition of the term “*hypocephalus*”

The term *hypocephalus* refers to a piece of Late Period and Ptolemaic funerary equipment. It is specifically, an amuletic disk, made of cartonnage, bronze, textile, or rarely from papyrus and even wood, emulating a solar disk. The diameters of these objects vary from 8.0 to 23.0 cm, and they are generally flat. In the rare cases that hypocephali are concave, they are believed to have functioned to protect the head as a kind of funerary cap (DE CENIVAL 1990). The custom of using hypocephali is evident in the Upper Egyptian sites of Thebes, Abydos, and Akhmim, at Hermopolis in Middle Egypt, and within Lower Egypt, at the cemeteries associated with Memphis.

It is clear that the hypocephalus does not become a widespread funerary object. Hypocephali remained exclusive pieces of funerary equipment reserved for the high clergy and for the members of their families who occupied also high ranking positions in the *pallacide* of the temples. On the basis of our researches we can state that in Thebes families of priests and priestess of Amon, in Akhmim those of Min, and in Memphis the ones of Ptah were owners of the disks. At the moment 149 examples are known.

In the present state of research, it seems that hypocephali came into use during the 4th century BC. It is likely that that the priestly community of Thebes guided the development of this species of equipment, in accord with the theological changes in the cycles of Osiris and Amon that show themselves in religious literature, architecture and other archaeological traces surviving from that period.

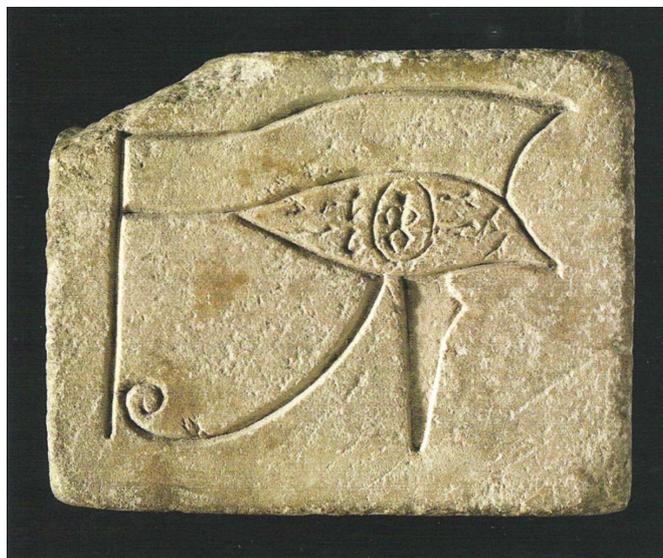
The evolution of the hypocephalus began during the 3rd Intermediate Period when texts emphasising Amon's omnipotent, transcendent and universal nature were gradually integrated into the Book of the Dead. These “supplementary chapters” can be considered as the direct antecedents of hypocephali. By the time the first hypocephali appeared in the 4th century BC, six hundred years of conceptual experimentation in the theology of Amon and Osiris had reached its peak. The epoch produced a variety of interesting religious “solutions,” among which belong healing statues, Horus stelaes, and the series of novel textual corpora such as the Books of Breathing, the Lamentations of Isis and Nephthys, the Great decrees of Osiris, and the Book of Traversing Eternity. The hypocephalus possibly made its appearance in parallel with these introductions, as an amuletic device formulated in direct relation to Book of the Dead chapters 162-165 in Thebes.

Spell 162 prescribed that the amulet be placed beneath the head of the deceased, to protect the deceased in the darkness of the Netherworld. Once the dead person received the

light and energy emitted by the hypocephalus, he could “appear again like one who is on Earth”. The Light and Energy come into being by the invocations and magical formulae addressed to the creator god. This general idea is conveyed in chapters 163-165 too, where Amon appears in different pan-iconic forms. The god is described as a tremendous and universal creature. Amon makes his way on the sky in the protection of his uraeus which produces fiery flames to shield him against his enemies. The texts identify the protection of the uraeus-snake with the protection of the wedjat-eye.



Hypocephalus, Paris, Louvre N 4402



Plaque, Paris, Louvre E 14240

The hypocephalus, on the basis of the representations of Amon in the centre panel of the disk, is, according to the Ancient Egyptian theory, identical with the pupil of the wedjat-eye. Amon’s hidden and tremendous forms are ultimately responsible for the life-giving and protecting energy that the sun disk radiated over the head of the deceased.

The protection of the head has a key-role in the Ancient Egyptian funerary beliefs beginning from prehistoric times. References in the Old Kingdom Pyramid Texts and Middle Kingdom Coffin Texts make it clear that priests identified the head with Re itself. So the revitalization of the deceased's head was particularly important throughout the history of Ancient Egypt. In different epochs, different kinds of practices were invented to protect the head. The hypocephalus amulet that appeared in the 4th century BC was one of the latest methods devised in this on-going pattern of belief.

2. Objectives of the dissertation

The hypocephalus was already the focus of my MA thesis in 2007, at which time I had already gathered and discussed the principal theories and speculations arising about the disks during the last two hundred years. The MA thesis laid a foundation for the research that I was to undertake in the dissertation.

The hypocephalus is still a seldom investigated topic of Egyptology. Between 1961 and 1998, Edith Varga studied the antecedents of the object type, gathering all practices aiming protection of the head until the 4th century BC from all over Egypt. Through her work, hypocephali were “rediscovered” for Egyptology. She identified no less than two thirds of the presently known examples, and published these in several articles. The analysis and typology of the amulet at the time it appeared in the 4th century BC remained for a further research project. In my thesis, I aimed at continuing the researches of Edith Varga and to present the resulting catalogue of hypocephali to the public.

In 2007, I had already thrown light on some erroneous theories regarding hypocephali, and I have attempted in the dissertation to give a detailed account on these. From the very beginning of the thesis, I felt that it was essential to better define hypocephalus object category, and to ensure that objects mistakenly identified over the last centuries, be interpreted correctly.

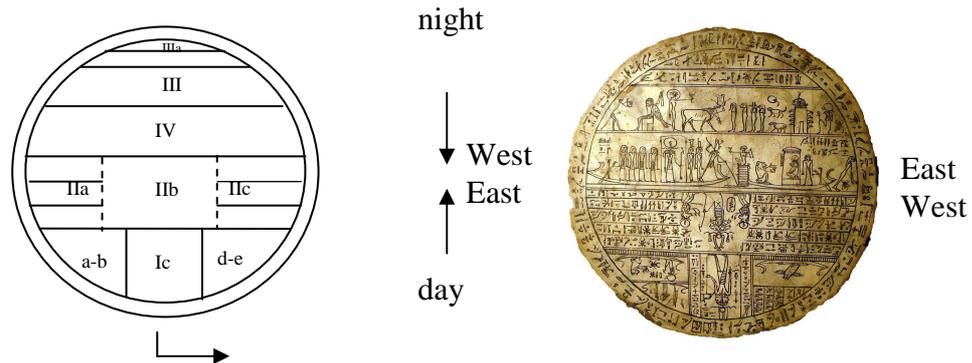
- Round terra cotta discs from Saqqara are not hypocephali, since they were not found under the head of the deceased, but instead, near the sarcophagus in the sarcophagus chamber of XXVIth dynasty tombs.
- “Rectangular and three dimensional hypocephali” discussed in the literature, are mere inventions. Rectangular panels containing the text of, or depicting the vignette of BD spell 162, or statues inscribed with the same text are obviously not hypocephali. An object that includes BD spell 162 on its surface, or which carries the representation of

the *ihet-cow* is a separate category of magical artifact, not to be directly included with the list of known hypocephalus amulets.

3. Analysis of hypocephalus

3.1 The system of hypocephalus

The surface of hypocephali were richly decorated and inscribed with various kinds of texts. The analysis of these objects can be based on the systematisation of the decoration. In general, on the edge of the amulet a circular text was inscribed, which borders the interior section, the so called *pictorial field*. Typologies of the object focus on these two sections. The *pictorial field* was divided by horizontal lines into smaller bands, or registers. In the morphology of the designs of hypocephali, the four register type with two opposite hemispheres was possibly the first and most widespread version (distributed from Thebes to Memphis). So, I considered this version as the “standard” and adapted the analysis of disks with fewer registers accordingly.



On disks with three, or two registers new iconography was rarely depicted, in cases where it occurs, it appears to have been a variation of the standard iconography.

On the basis of the register structure, we have to distinguish the *concentric hypocephali* and the corpus of *textile hypocephali* from the “standard”, which show a distinct iconography. (See plate II)

3.2 Analysis of the iconography

The study of the iconography has shown the ideal order of the registers and the figures. The general theme is the Solar cycle in its Late Period interpretation. This over-arching cycle was emphasized in the theme of register II (the four ram headed deity (*b3 dmd*)) and that of register IV (the meeting of the two celestial discs (*snsn k3.wj*)), which together were responsible for creating the life-giving light and energy beneath the head of the deceased. The

pictorial field was intended to depict the way in which the Sun could create an efficacious *microcosm* beneath the head of the deceased. The two opposing hemispheres symbolise the opposition of day and night. In addition to the opposing hemispheres, the cycle of the cosmic matters is expressed directly by the discoidal of the amulet and by the continuous aspect of the rim inscription.

3.3. The typology of the rim inscription

The analysis of the iconography is followed by the typology of rim inscriptions. In my system, I differentiated six text types. But there are examples which show mixed types, so there are transitions between the groups. (See plate I)

Typologies help to determine groups of disks, which may help to trace the development of hypocephali between the 4th and 2nd centuries BC.

4. Results

After the examination of the iconography and the texts, I was able to differentiate workshop products. In that chapter I tried to insert hypocephali into the series of funerary equipment of each regional centre in the period of the 4th through 2nd centuries BC.

I also tried to stress the local character in the production of the disks:

- Each centre had local characteristics affecting both texts and iconography.

The first disks dated to the 4th century BC in all cases (Theban, Abydenian and Akhmimic) were of the four-register type (standard) and probably were inscribed with Text Group 1 on the rim. Unfortunately, this kind of observation by itself, is not always enough to determine the date of a hypocephalus, and conclusions about date can only be reached by considering the available prosopographical information as well. Not only do the number and structure of the disks show great variety during the 3rd century BC, but the texts do as well. Text Group 2 (in Thebes and Hermopolis) and Text Group 3 (only in Thebes) appeared in the first half of the 3rd century, while Text Group 4 became general only around the reign of Ptolemy II Philadelphos. The introduction of the fourth text type occurred in tandem with the modification of the perspective of the two hemispheres of the disks: the orientation of the scenes and texts in them were adjusted to match, in order to avoid visual confusion. By this time, a drastic simplification of the iconography can also be detected.

In Memphis, on the contrary, a separate evolution of hypocephalic iconography can be observed. As far as is known, Memphis was alone in producing exclusively textile disks

and these were inspired by the content of BD 134. This chapter is about the protection of the deceased and about his or her apotheosis. The preference in Memphis for illustration of the hypocephalus in terms of BD 134 is understandable, in view of the fact that chapters BD 162-165 were had strong Theban overtones based on the ideology of the cult of Amon. Accordingly, Memphite priests omitted spells 163-165 from the canon of the Book of the Dead which they promulgated.

The Memphite textile disks can be dated from the end of the 3rd century BC down to end of the 2nd century BC. We can suppose that the southern revolts of the late 3rd early 2nd centuries, paired with steadily deteriorating economic conditions might have contributed to the decline of the richness of elite burials, and hypocephali started to disappear in Upper and Middle Egypt. Meanwhile the northern part of the country, and Memphis in particular, remained free from the kind of problems which would have disrupted the funerary behaviour of the elite. It seems the tradition of the hypocephalus flourished in Memphis during the 2nd century BC.

During the three years of doctoral study and during the writing of this thesis, I devoted much time to the exploration of the genealogies connected with the owners of hypocephali. This prosopographical research constituted an indispensable part of the work, since for objects that have come into museum collections without any context, the only way to know about them (such as where they may have originated and when they were excavated) is to search for clues within the genealogies of their original owners.

5. The catalogue

My work is capped off by a catalogue in which the available information contained upon the disks, has been presented, together with possible genealogical reconstructions and photographs and/or drawings of each piece.

List of publications of the author directly relating to the topic:

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- Mekis T. 2008.** Adalékok a hypokephálok tipológiai rendszerezéséhez. in: *Egyiptomi Füzetek* 8/1.
- Mekis T. 2011.** L'équipement funéraire de la prêtresse thébaine Nestaneteretten. in: *CdE* LXXXVI, 41-81.
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List of abbreviations:

- AcArch (B)* = *Acta Archaeologica. Acad. Scientiar. Hungar.* Budapest.
- AcOr(B)* = *Acta Orientalia.* Budapest.
- Ä&L* = *Ägypten und Levante.* Wien.
- AegetPan* = *Aegyptus et Pannonia.* Budapest.
- BAR – IS* = *British Archaeological Reports. International Series.* London.
- BdE* = *Bibliothèque d'Étude.* Le Caire.
- BMHBA* = *Bulletin du Musée Hongrois de Beaux-Arts.* Budapest.
- BSAK* = *Studien zur Altägyptischen Kultur. Beihefte.* Hamburg.
- CdE* = *Chronique d'Égypte.* Bruxelles.
- HÄB* = *Hildesheimer ägyptologische Beiträge.* Hildesheim.
- JARCE* = *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt.* Boston. New York.
- JEOL* = *Jaarbericht van het vooraziat.-egyptisch Genootschap, Ex Oriente Lux.* Leiden.
- JSSEA* = *Journal of the Society of the Studies of Egyptian Antiquities.* Toronto.
- OLA* = *Orientalia Loveniensia Analecta.* Leuven.
- OMRO* = *Oudheikundige Mededelingen uit het Rijksmuseum van Oudheden,* Leiden.
- OPEES* = *Egypt Exploration Society Occasional Publications.* London.
- P. L. Bat.* = *Papyrologica Lugduno-Batava.* Leiden.
- RdE* = *Revue d'Égyptologie.* Paris.
- RRÉ* = *Revue Roumaine d'Égyptologie.* București.
- SAK* = *Studien zur altägyptischen Kultur.* Hamburg.
- SAT* = *Studien zum altägyptischen Totenbuh.* Wiesbaden.
- StudAeg* = *Studia Aegyptiaca,* Budapest.
- YES* = *Yale Egyptological Studies.* New Haven.

Plate I

Typologies:

Typology of the rim inscriptions:

1. Discs with the incipit „*jnk hk3 pwj w^cb...*” and its variants
2. Discs with the invocation „*j db3.tj...*” and its variants
3. Discs citing the BD spell 162
4. The „Osirian” type texts (invocations to the gods of the necropolis, offering formulae, genealogies)
5. Discs with the incipit „*hj pr.w sn-t3 k.w...*”
6. Discs with so far unique texts

Plate II

Register typology:

Classic discs (K)

4 register type („standard”):... N3526

3 register type: Paris, Bibliothèque

2 register type: National, E 174,b

1 register type:..... Myers

Concentric: hypocephal

Textil discs (T)

On rectangular linen

1 reg. type without rim inscr. Paris, Louvre, N 4402

1 register with ram heads or crocodile heads on the rim:..... Christchurch, Canterbury Museum, EA 1988.77

A hypocephalus in the protection of goddesses: London, BM, EA 10269

3 register type London, UC, 32438

4 register type

5 register type Torino, ME, cat. no 1870.5



Paris, Louvre,



Paris, Bibliothèque National, E 174,b



Myers hypocephal



London, BM, EA 37907



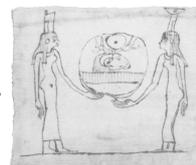
Paris, Louvre, N3182



Paris, Louvre, N 4402



Christchurch, Canterbury Museum, EA 1988.77



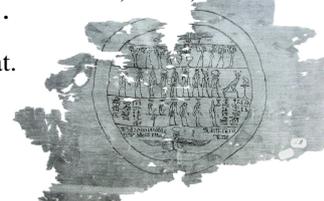
London, BM, EA 10269



London, UC, 32438



Wien, ÖNB, AEG. 8355



Torino, ME, cat. no 1870.5