

The Hypocephalus: an Ancient Egyptian Funerary Amulet

Tamás Mekis



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1 Introduction

1.1 Perspectives of the work

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

The hypocephalus is still a topic seldom investigated in Egyptology. Between 1961 and 1998, Edith Varga studied the antecedents of the object type, discussing all practices aimed at the protection of the head up to the 4th century BC from all over Egypt.¹ Through her ongoing commitment to the subject, hypocephali were ‘rediscovered’ for Egyptology. She identified no fewer than two-thirds of the examples presently known, and published these in several articles.² The analysis and typology of these amuletic objects at the time when they appeared in the 4th century BC remained for a further research project. In my work, I aimed at continuing the research of Edith Varga, and at presenting the catalogue of hypocephali to the public.

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

The real analysis may only begin after this. The surfaces 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, the ‘rim inscription’.³ It borders the interior section, the so-called ‘pictorial field’. Typologies of the object differentiate between these two sections.

The ‘pictorial field’ was divided by horizontal lines into smaller bands, or registers. In the structure of the designs of hypocephali, the four-register type with two opposite hemispheres was possibly the first and most widespread version (dispersed from Thebes to Memphis). Therefore, I considered this version as the ‘standard’⁴ and adapted the analysis of discs with fewer registers accordingly (FIGURE 1).

On discs with three or two registers new iconography was rarely depicted. In cases where it does occur, it appears to have been a variation of the standard iconography.

Based on the register structure, one has to distinguish the ‘concentric hypocephali’ and the corpus of certain ‘textile hypocephali’ from the ‘standard’ type, which shows a distinct iconography.

The funerary equipment shows a great variety in its iconography. Among the examples, there are no



FIGURE 1.

¹ Varga 1998a; Varga 1998b; Varga 2002b.

² Varga 1961; Varga 1962; Varga 1968; Varga 1982; Varga 1989; Varga 1993; Varga 1994; Varga 2002a.

³ A designation created by J. Gee (Gee 2006: 45).

⁴ A designation already applied by B. Vallée-Damien in 2007 (Vallée-Damien 2007: 1875).

two identical. In some details, every piece is an individualistic creation. In any event, there are some iconographic characters exhibiting common features. These iconographic elements define the group of 'standard prototype'. To distinguish these, I found it necessary to create a repertory, which may help to explore the variations of the iconography as well as to define those characteristics which determine most hypocephali. Each repertory of a register is followed by the detailed analysis of the iconographic elements within it.

I have separated the examination of discs with concentric structure and the textile ones, which are individualistic interpretations of classic hypocephali.

The analysis of the iconography is followed by the typology of the rim inscription. I have given an overview of previous solutions arrived at by different authors for the typology and I present my own.⁵ Afterwards, I have transliterated each object in conformity with the order of my system. Instead of making the translation of each piece, I chose to present one hypothetical translation showing all varieties of syntagmas appearing in the text group. The translation is followed by notes. In my system, I have differentiated six text types. However, there are examples, which show mixed types, so there are transitions between the groups.

The next chapter of the work presents texts inscribed in the inner part of the discs bordered by the rim inscription. Unfortunately, in some cases the solution of these texts is not complete, they still await their 'Champollion'.

The penultimate chapter focuses on workshop traditions, I tried to insert hypocephali into the series of funerary equipment of each centre in the period of the 4th-2nd centuries BC, as well as to stress also local characters of the production of the discs. Each centre has local characteristics with respect to texts and iconography.

Finally, in the conclusion I give an overview of the results.

The final part of the book contains the catalogue of known hypocephali, which presents every piece of information available from the discs, together with possible genealogical reconstructions and with a photograph and/or drawing of the artifact.

⁵ At the transliteration and the examination of the texts I preferred the Leiden proof system.

1.2 Definition of the term 'hypocephalus'

The term 'hypocephalus' refers to a piece of Late Period and Ptolemaic funerary equipment. It is specifically, an amuletic disc, made of cartonnage, bronze, textile, and more rarely, papyrus, or even wood, emulating a solar disc. The diameters of these objects vary from 8.0 to 23.0 cm, and they are generally flat. At the moment, 158 examples offer a chance to make comparisons. In the rare cases where hypocephali are concave, they are believed to have functioned to protect the head as a kind of pillow or funerary cap.⁶ The custom of using hypocephali is evident in the Upper Egyptian sites of Thebes, Abydos, and Akhmim, at Hermupolis in Middle Egypt, and farther north, at the cemeteries associated with Memphis.

It is clear that the use of the hypocephalus never became widespread. Hypocephali remained exclusive pieces of funerary equipment reserved for the clergy and for the members of their families who occupied also priestly positions in the *pallacide* of the temples.⁷ Based on my studies, I can state that in Thebes, families of the priests and priestesses of Amon used the object, in Akhmim, the clergy of Min did so, and in Memphis the clergy of Ptah.⁸

In the present state of research, it seems that hypocephali came into use during the 4th century BC. It is likely that the priestly community of Thebes guided the development of this type of equipment, in accord with the theological changes in the cycles of Osiris and Amon that show themselves in religious literature,⁹ architecture and other archaeological traces surviving from that period.¹⁰ The evolution of the hypocephalus began during the Third Intermediate Period, when texts emphasising Amon's omnipotent, transcendent and universal nature were gradually integrated into the *Book of the Dead* (BD).¹¹ These 'supplementary

⁶ De Cenival 1992: 109; Étienne 2002: 110.

⁷ This statement was questioned by Luca Miatello in 2008, basing his opinion on the texts of hypocephali (Miatello 2008: 287). Albeit if one observes that texts of the discs may exactly come to the conclusion that the owners of the discs were priests and their families.

⁸ Concerning hypocephali of Abydos, only the family of Djed-hor provides information on priestly titles, those of Hermupolis mention no titles, while their find contexts are also unknown, one cannot draw a steady conclusion concerning these two centres.

⁹ The richness and abundance of the Osiris theology which take shape in the last thousand years BC can be just measured by the gradual publication of the papyri originating from Theban archives of the 4th century BC, without attempting to be comprehensive: Faulkner 1933: pl. VI-VII, 1-32; Haikal 1970: 16-19, 25-45 and Haikal 1972: 7-48, 74-76; Caminos 1972: 205-224; Burkard 1995: 130-178; Quack 2000: 74-87; Assmann *et al.* 2008; Kucharek 2010.

¹⁰ Just to mention here the archaeological and epigraphic work in Karnak concerning the Osiris chapels: Coulon 2001; Coulon 2003; Coulon 2005; Coulon (ed.) 2010.

¹¹ The widening and deepening each time of the Amon theology may also be testified in the Third Intermediate Period. The texts of the coffins of the priests and priestess (Niwiński 1996; Niwiński 1999), the Mythological Papyri (Piankoff 1957; Niwiński 1989b.), the God's



FIGURE 2a. Hypocephalus, Paris,
Louvre N 4402



FIGURE 2b. Plaque, Paris, Louvre E 14240

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 stelae,¹² 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*, to mention only a few.¹³ The hypocephalus possibly made its appearance in parallel with these introductions, as

an amuletic device formulated in direct relation to *Book of the Dead* spells 162–165 in Thebes.

Spell 162 prescribed that the amulet be placed beneath the head of the deceased to protect them in the darkness of the underworld. Once the dead person received the light and energy emitted by the hypocephalus, he could 'appear again like one who is on earth'.¹⁴ The light and energy are generated by the invocations and magical formulae addressed to the creator god. This general idea is conveyed in spells 163–165 too, where Amon appears in several multifaceted forms.¹⁵ The god is described as a tremendous and universal creature. He makes his way through the sky under the protection of his *uraeus*, which produces fiery flames to shield him against his enemies. The texts identify the fiery guardianship of

Decrees (Golénischeff 1927: 169–196, Barucq and Daumas 1980: 255–262; Assmann 1999: 320–325, no. 131) and the supplementary chapters of the *Book of the Dead* (Pleyte 1881; Wüthrich 2010) are only some elements of the rich Amon-theology dated to the last thousand years BC in Thebes.

¹² For the researches in sum, see: Sternberg-El Hotabi 1999.

¹³ Their recent monograph: Smith 2009.

¹⁴ It is exactly the result of reaching the *ꜣh*-being form. Englund 1978: 163–164.

¹⁵ Quack 2006.

the *uraeus* (FIGURE 2a) with the protection produced by the *wedjat-eye* (FIGURE 2b).¹⁶

Moreover, in view of the representations of Amon in the centre panel of the discs, hypocephali are properly equivalent in the Egyptian belief system with the pupil of the *wedjat-eye* itself. Amon's hidden, but at the same time tremendous forms and powers, are ultimately responsible for the life-giving, protective energy which the sun-disc radiates over the head of the deceased.

Protection of the head plays a key role in the Ancient Egyptian funerary belief from prehistoric times. References in the Old Kingdom *Pyramid Texts* (PT) and Middle Kingdom *Coffin Texts* (CT) make it clear that priests identified the head with Re himself. From that time onward, the revitalisation of the head remained particularly important, although from epoch to epoch practices varied. The hypocephalus amulet that appeared in the 4th century BC was one of the latest methods devised in accordance with this pattern of belief.

¹⁶ Wüthrich 2010.