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EXECRATION AGAIN? REMARKS ON AN OLD KINGDOM RITUAL

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Abstract: Execration rites intended as a means of magically disabling enemies are attested from the times of at least the Old Kingdom. Hitherto, traces of six rituals from this period have been recognized, four performed in Giza and two in Saqqara. Despite frequent discussion in the academic literature, there are still some issues to be taken up, such as precise dating of the finds and, what is relevant, the reasons why these rituals were performed at this particular time. Occasion to undertake the subject was given by the discovery of yet another figurine, this time in Saqqara, in the late Old Kingdom necropolis of middle class officials located to the west of the Step Pyramid.

Keywords: Saqqara, Old Kingdom, necropolis, magical rituals, execration, clay figurines, pottery

The necropolises of ancient Egypt were the site of rituals and rites which need not have always been connected with the funerary sphere. Execration rituals were among rituals of this kind attested since at least the late Old Kingdom. Egyptologists have discussed the topic for years, especially when publishing the archaeological remains of such rituals. Studies have concentrated mainly on paleographic issues, names and the essence of the ritual itself. Its function has been discussed more seldom, presumably because it seems clear and understandable: execration rituals were meant to disable enemies by magical means (Junker 1947: 36; Rittner 1995). Despite the intensity of research on the subject, there are still some issues that deserve to

be looked at from a slightly different angle. Firstly, there is the question of a precise dating of the finds and, secondly, the reasons for which these rituals were performed at this particular time. Occasion for these considerations has been given by the discovery of a fragment of yet another execration plaque.

This plaque was discovered in Saqqara, in Shaft 88 from the late Old Kingdom necropolis of middle class officials, which is located to the west of the Step Pyramid. The shaft was part of Anonymous Tomb XVIII from the Lower Necropolis, which has been the object of Polish–Egyptian research by a PCMA team for close to twenty years (updated bibliography in successive volumes of the *Saqqara* series).

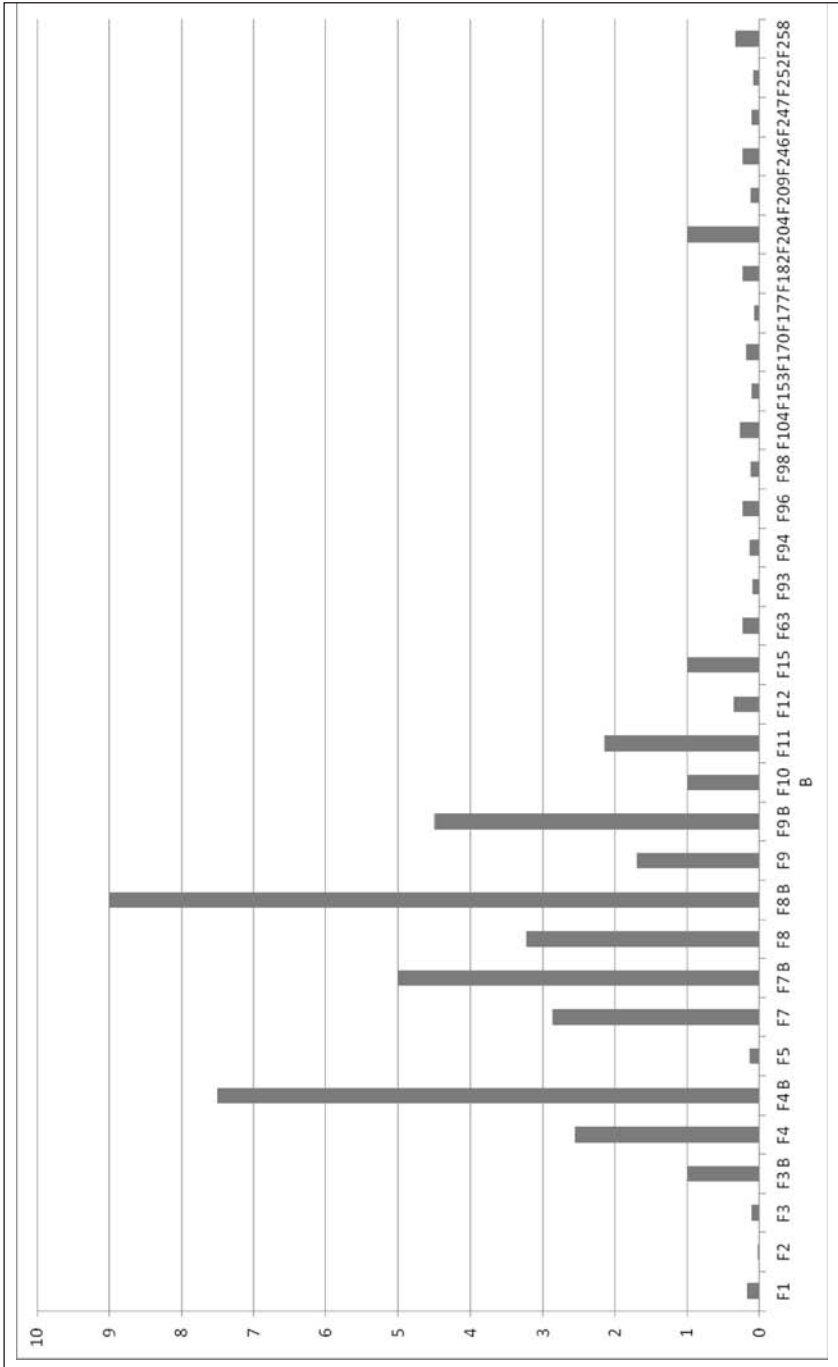


Fig. 1. Vessels found in Shaft 88 together with the figurine: F – form; B – base of a form (see Rzeuska 2006; 2013)

The fill of the shaft produced some pottery, but its fragmentation and typological abundance, coupled with the absence of a distinct offering deposit usually found in burial shafts, left no doubt as to the secondary character of most of the assemblage. The fill contained numerous sherds of beer jars representing virtually all types known from the necropolis, just as rich as in the case of red-slipped open forms [Fig. 1]. The material is chronologically varied, but the predominant forms are vessels from phases III–IV, that is, the reign of Pepy II, suggesting that Shaft 88 was in use at this time (Kuraszkiewicz 2013; Rzeuska 2013).

A fragment of a small rectangular object, handmade of Nile mud, was found in the fill of the shaft along with the pottery [Fig. 2]. The unslipped surface can be described as weak red (10 R 5/4) in color. The object is of the same shape as plaques from other deposits [Appendix 1], but is slightly bigger. It is the only fragment of this type found in the necropolis so far and it is possible that it did not come from burial shaft 88. Moreover, there must have been more objects of this type, as indicated by the other known deposits.

Evidence of six different rituals has been recorded hitherto from the Memphite

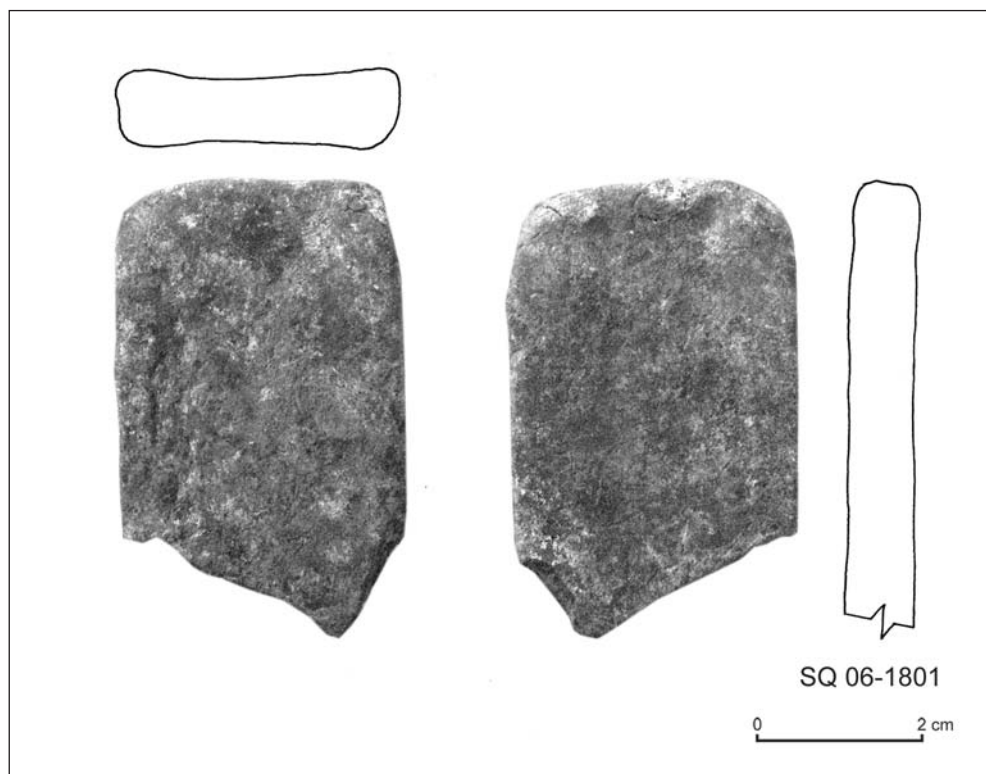


Fig. 2. Figure from Shaft 88: front and back view
(Drawing and photo T. Rzeuska)

necropolis, four from Giza and two from Saqqara, the latter including the plaque here described [see *Table 1*]. There is one other assemblage, but it is of unknown provenience and therefore of lesser importance for the present discussion (Wimmer 1993). All the finds are similar, rectangular plaques of a few centimeters in size, the edges rounded and the top extended and triangular in shape, handmade of unbaked Nile mud. In four cases the plaques were found in beer jars [Fig. 3], which were inscribed with texts recording dates. The names on the plaques are mainly non-Egyptian and they are frequently repeated on plaques from different deposits (Osing 1976).

All the objects have been dated on the grounds of inscriptions found on jars and plaques, but not as a result of dating the

pottery itself. H. Junker was the only one to observe that different variants of the beer jars containing plaques were often found in the Giza necropolis, but he also rightly noted that never in the early mastabas (Junker 1947: 31).

Meanwhile studies on Egyptian pottery have been intensified considerably and beer jars from the Old Kingdom are now very well dated. Vessels of identical shape were discovered in the PCMA excavations of the necropolis in West Saqqara, in archaeological contexts from the reign of Pepy II [Fig. 4]. This observation narrows down the date for the part of the figurines that come from beer jars to the rule of this pharaoh.

The other issue to consider concerns the reasons for which these execration rituals were performed at the time mentioned in

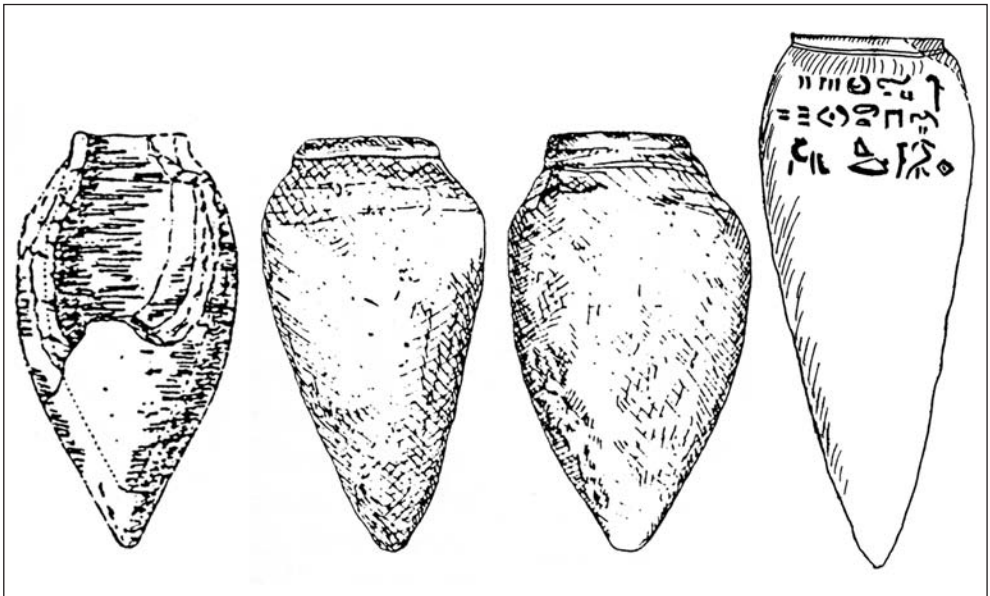


Fig. 3. Beer jars which were found containing execration figures, from excavations in Giza, first from left, H. Junker's, two in the center Abu Bakr's and last, G. Reisner's (after Junker 1938: 227, Fig. 45.3; Faltings 1998: 219, Fig. 16b.164–165; Osing 1976: Pl. 51)

the inscription. All three dated inscriptions on beer jars refer to the same month of the same year, the “first after the fifth count” of the reign of an unnamed pharaoh. This ruler must have been Pepy II, if the form of the beer jars is anything to go by. It means that at least three execration rites took place in the Giza necropolis in the course of a single month. It is not very likely that these rituals would have been carried out by private persons (Quack 2002) and the careless execution of these objects is hardly persuasive in this respect. All handmade objects, such as beer jars, look exactly the same, regardless of whether they were made for royal complexes or private tombs. The same principle concerns the plaques which were prepared solely for burial purposes.

The concurrence of the dates does not seem to be casual and indeed it appears to be a planned action, especially when we consider that the plaques are similar and many of the names written on them are repeated in all of the deposits (Abu Bakr Osing 1973). This suggests in turn that some events taking place in public or political life in the terminal years of the Sixth Dynasty, when central authority was shaking in its foundations, necessitated the performance of execration rites intended magically to disable the enemy. There is not enough data to consider who the unfortunate named on the plaques were. Evidently their actions had made them undesirable to the point that magic was used to exclude them from society.

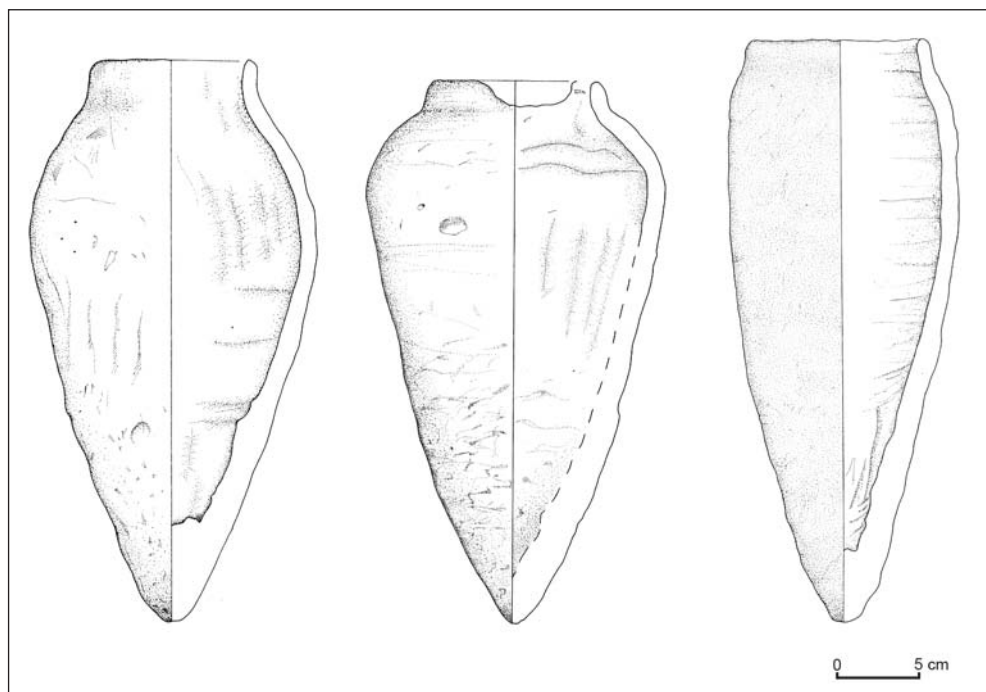


Fig. 4. Beer jars from the reign of Pepy II, found in the necropolis in West Saqqara (Drawing T. Rzeuska; inking M. Orzechowska)

Table 1. List of finds of execration figures from the late Old Kingdom

No.	Description of the find	Container (jar)	Inscriptions
1	19 almost complete clay plaquettes and small flakes found inside the jar (Junker 1947: 32) or 21 plaquettes, 17 complete and 4 fragmentary (Junker 1947: Fig. 10; Abu Bakr, Osing 1973: 97), average height 5.5 cm; rectangular with rounded edges, small projection at the back, pierced horizontally. Unbaked objects, handmade of Nile silt. In shape, the plaquettes resembled bound captives.	Beer jar, height 35 cm	Inscription in black ink on a jar: “after the 5th count, third month of <i>pr.t</i> , day 4, <i>šhm?</i> <i>k3?</i> Name of the ruler not given.
2	Total count of 249 figurines, including 223 complete examples, 26 fragmentary ones, inscribed, measuring about 5.5 x 2 x 0.4–0.9 cm. rectangular, with rounded edges, one fragment in the form of an elongated triangle. Blob of clay, pierced horizontally, attached at back. Resembling bound human figures in shape. Moreover, fragments of a larger figure, preserved height approximately 15 cm (originally 18 cm), also handmade of unbaked Nile silt, but not inscribed.	Two beer jars, resembling a vessel with figurines found by Junker (above, no. 1); height 31.7 cm, maximum diameter 16.7 cm, rim 8.3 x 8 cm, second jar 31.9 x 16.6 cm, rim 9 x 7.8 cm	Inscription on a jar: “year after the 5th count, third month of <i>pr.t</i> , day 29”. Name of the ruler not given. Inscriptions on the jars and figurines by the same hand.
3	72 figurines: 66 complete and 6 fragmentary, average dimensions 5–5.4 x 2.1–2.3 cm. Made of unbaked clay, rectangular, with rounded rim. Suspension element attached at back, pierced horizontally. Other objects included an inscribed human figure and two other pieces, all of unbaked silt, not inscribed. According to H. Junker, who saw the documentation, they resembled those found by him.	Clay jar, later lost. According to notes, it was conical with pointed base and emphasized rim, 37 cm high, maximum diameter 15 cm	Inscription on a jar: “year after the 5th count, third month of <i>pr.t</i> , day 5”. Name of ruler not given. Inscription on a jar and on almost all of the figurines in black ink, only one written in red ink.
4	91 figures, including 66 complete and 25 fragmentary ones. Exactly the same type as those described above (no. 3)	No data	
5	12 figures: 5 whole, 7 fragmentary; the complete ones measure 6–6.5 x 2–2.5 cm. Rectangular with slight triangular elongation, handmade of unbaked silt (TNE94:117). No information on suspension elements on the back of the figures.	No data, unstratified finds, presumably found without context	Names written in Old Hieratic, part Egyptian, but most of foreign origin; the inscription appears to be slightly older than those from Giza (see above, no. 2).
6	Fragmentary figure of Nile silt.	None	Illegible tablet.

Necropolis	Findspot	Dating	Publication
Giza	Next to mastabas S 679-705, outside the wall of the courtyard of Rawer II. According to H. Junker, it was not the original findspot because of a fresh break to the rim and no matching fragment found nearby. He excluded any connection either with Rawer II, as it would have had to be inside the complex, or with any of the tombs in the vicinity. On the other hand, he observed that the tomb where the jar was found could not have been far away, as the contents of the jar would not have been preserved had the jar been transported over any distance.	Late Old Kingdom or even First Intermediate Period Dating on the grounds of the stratigraphy, the jar, the date of the formula and paleography of the signs.	Junker 1947: 30–38, Fig. 10, Pls VIb–VII
Giza	To the north of the mastaba of Neferi in the west cemetery of Giza.	Pepy I at the earliest – Pepy II at the latest Dating based on the formula of the date and the names in the inscription.	Abu Bakr, Osing 1973
Giza	Found during the cleaning of street G 7200 in the east cemetery, east of mastaba G 7230. H. Junker referred to the spot as: “auf dem Felde östlich Grab Lepsius 23”.	Pepy II	Osing 1976; mentioned by Junker 1947: 35–36; Posener 1953
Giza	Cemetery G 2000		Osing 1976; mentioned by Posener 1958
Saqqara, necropolis next to the pyramid of the pharaoh Teti	Mastaba of Nedjetempet, shaft 5, secondary?, about 1 m deep, no information about any other finds from the shaft.	Pepy II Dating on the grounds of the inscription	Sowada, Callaghan, Bentley 1999: 16, 96, Pl. 4; Quack 2002
Saqqara, necropolis to the west of the complex of Netjerykhet	Burial shaft 88, anonymous funerary complex XVIII, secondary context.	Pepy II Dating on the grounds of the archaeological context and the pottery assemblage.	None

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