



KVĚTA SMOLÁRIKOVÁ

SOME REFLECTIONS ON EMBALMER'S CACHE OF UDJAHORRESNET AT ABUSIR

ABSTRACT: The rather small Saite-Persian cemetery at Abusir was founded – judging from the foundation deposits of Udjahorresnet – at the very end of the 26th Dynasty when this part of the extensive necropolis of the ancient capital Memphis attracted the attention of several prominent members of the royal court. The cemetery consists of a cluster of huge and smaller Late Period shaft tombs discovered in a relatively good state of preservation. Its founder, the famous Saite nobleman Udjahorresnet, together with other high dignitaries were – surprisingly – the first and only builders at this remotely situated site. Archaeological excavation and subsequent anthropological research by Professor Strouhal shows that albeit his mummy was no longer present, certainly due to the repeated robbery of the tomb, the poor remains of his embalmer's cache stored in a deep shaft dug in the south-western corner, within his funerary complex were preserved in sufficient quantity. However, this cannot be said about its quality. All collected data, mainly his shabtis, several fragments of magical bricks as well as a model of the offering table (Bareš 1999: 66–67) indicates that Udjahorresnet was really buried in this newly founded cemetery – situated very close to the administrative centre of the country – and not in his native town Sais in the Western Delta or somewhere in Persia as was supposed to date.

KEY WORDS: Udjahorresnet – Embalmer's cache – Abusir – Saite Dynasty – Shaft tombs

Our contemporary information about the occupation of Egypt by the Persian army, or more exactly about the First Persian Domination over Egypt (525–404 BC) comes – among other written sources – from the rather comprehensive autobiographical text engraved on the surface of the naophorus statue of the prominent Egyptian official Udjahorresnet now kept in the Museo Gregoriano in the Vatican but very probably

a part of the collection of the Roman Emperor Hadrian in his Villa Tivoli (Botti and Romanelli 1951: 32–40). However, originally it might have been located in one of the temples of Sais, the native town of Udjahorresnet and his family. We have known that he served at the court of the two last Saite kings Ahmose II and Psamtek III and the first two Persian kings, Cambyses III and Darius I (Posener 1939: 1–29). The

Received 29 May 2017; accepted 15 February 2019.

© 2019 Moravian Museum, Anthropos Institute, Brno. All rights reserved.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26720/anthro.19.02.15.1>

very end of his career was with certainty connected with the new Persian rulers of Egypt. As a short part of the abovementioned inscription mentions his journey to Persia, many Egyptologists supposed that he – as an old man – might have died there or on his return to Egypt:

(43) *The prince, count, royal seal-bearer, sole companion, prophet of those by whom one lives, the chief physician, Udjahorresnet, born of Atemirdis, he says: The majesty of the King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Darius, ever-living, commanded me to return to Egypt - when his majesty was in Elam and was Great Chief of all foreign lands and Great Ruler of Egypt...* (Lichtheim 1980: 39).

All in all, he was a well-known person a long time before his tomb was excavated. This happened at the Czech archaeological concession at Abusir in the year 1980 (Verner 1982: 163–166), where subsequently, thanks to long-term systematic research, a small cemetery dated to the end of the Saite and beginning of the Persian periods was unearthed, the so-called Saite-Persian cemetery. Unfortunately, the decoration of his burial chamber was unfinished (but the funerary spells frequently mentioned its owner: the Chief Physician Udjahorresnet), the sarcophagi were found partly broken and empty. In spite of the fact that the broken inner sarcophagus did not contain any fragment of a mummy or of other human skeletal remains, a mandibular fragment (Excavation no. 104/89) survived the plundering and was found during the 1989 season in the sand filling of the burial chamber above the lid of the outer limestone sarcophagus, in other words, in a secondary position. The subsequent thorough scientific examination by Professor Strouhal showed that this small fragment belonged to a young man who died between the age of 18 and 25 years. Judging from the abovementioned historical data about the life and professional career of Udjahorresnet, this fragment eliminates any possible connection with his physical remains (Strouhal 1999: 105). The result of Professor Strouhal's examination supported, at that time rather widespread opinion, that Udjahorresnet's unfinished tomb represents a pure cenotaph and that he is interred somewhere within the Persian Empire, because he died *en route* home; this problem was much debated among the specialists (Bareš 1999: 79) and surprisingly enough, the definite solution of this mystery brought only the discovery of his embalmer's cache during the 2003 archaeological season (Bareš *et al.* 2005: 95–106). Before divulging its circumstances, let us first consider the phenomenon of embalming

caches. During the Late Period, an enormous amount of pottery vessels was almost regularly inserted within the so-called embalming caches. This funerary practice was observed across Egypt (Ikram, Lopez-Grande 2011: 205–228, Smoláriková 2006: 261–270, Smoláriková 2011: 81–163), including Abusir and nearby Saqqara, as a part of the ancient Memphite cemeteries. Albeit the Saite-Persian cemetery is rather small and not so frequently mentioned as other necropolis, in respect of Late Period cemeteries, it is not short on big surprises. The last one is certainly connected with the embalming cache of the famous Saite official Udjahorresnet. In the area adjacent to the south-west corner of the massive limestone enclosure wall of the tomb of Udjahorresnet, about four metres to its south, a rather small shaft (measuring ca 2.1 m × 2.1 m and about 12 m deep) was closely examined, after it had been partly unearthed by previous work within the wider area of the Udjahorresnet funerary complex. The fill of shaft consisted in its upper layers of clean yellow sand, while lower layers contained fragments of mudbricks, pebbles, and some corroded pieces of broken vessels. Above its floor level, a massive – some 1.5 m thick – layer of very fragmentary preserved pottery sherds mixed with sand and debris came to light. The mass of pottery consists mainly of large Egyptian storage jars (ca 70–75 pieces), while bottles, bowls, lids, medium-sized jars, torch and some intact stands were in much smaller quantity, including some tiny fragments of damaged faience cups. The embalming vessels – in respect of their significance and function – represent a rich variety of well-known shapes abundantly attested throughout numerous cemeteries (Aston, Aston 2010: 207–225, Smoláriková 2011: 87–154). In this instance, however, large transport amphorae clearly predominate. They were used by the embalmers as an universal type, large enough to perfectly store all kinds of waste materials including pottery vessels, both intact – when smaller – and broken – when too large (French 2003: 224, Smoláriková 2016: Fig. 5). The provenance of the recovered vessels was almost solely Egyptian, except for some fragmentary preserved pieces of imported Phoenician and Clazomenian transport amphorae. Albeit the large storage jars were found broken (secondarily as fresh breaks were evident), the possibility cannot be excluded that the vessels were deposited at the bottom of the shaft intact. This idea corresponds to a similar situation in the intact embalmer's cache of general Menekhibnekau also buried at Abusir (Bareš, Smoláriková 2011: 81–163).

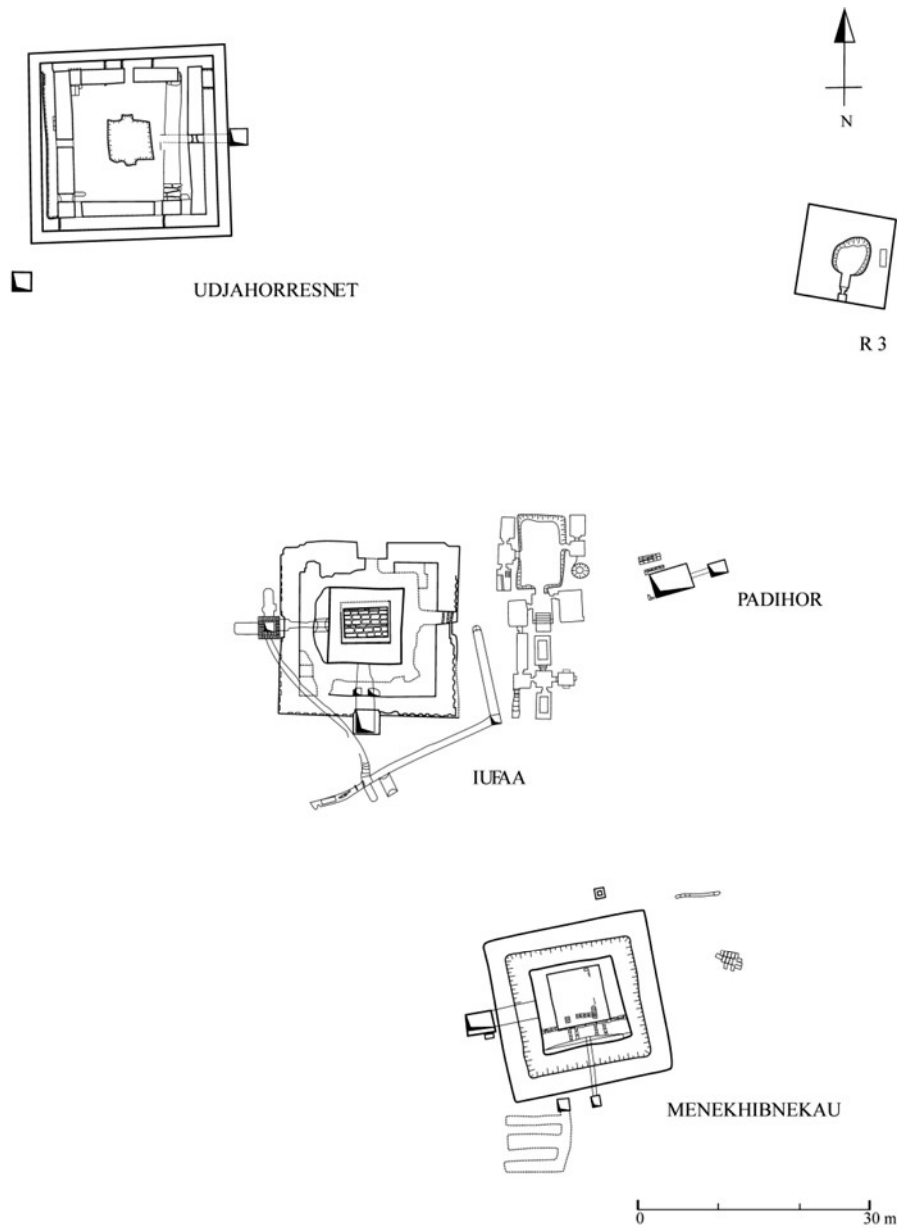


FIGURE 1: The Saitic-Persian Cemetery at Abusir.

This clearly indicates some care in its disposal, rather than the mere dumping of unwanted embalming equipment. Some of vessels contained residues of organic materials as well as a sticky cream rest of fine linen, i.e. traces of the embalmers' materials (Lauer, Iskander 1956: 167-195). Going into detail, on a few, faint remains of short inscriptions, written with black ink in Hieratic and Demotic scripts, were still well preserved, mentioning the previous organic contents

of those vessels. The shaft served with certainty for storing the large assemblage of pottery vessels as well as the fine faience cups, which functioned as containers for a wide range of materials that had been used during the costly mummification process and the final burial ceremonies (Bareš *et al.* 2005: 95-106).

As discussed above, the reason for storing the wide variety and rather huge quantity of embalming material was very probably more ritual than practical or

economic (especially in the case of a man from the upper echelon of Egyptian society) and should demonstrate that it was either too sacred, or too ritually unclear for further use, and as such was solely connected with deceased. As is clear from the Figure 1, the embalmer's deposit situated usually to the south-western corner of the elite Late Period large shaft tomb, created its integral and highly important part. Taking all these factors into account, there can be little doubt that the mummy of the high ranking official Udjahorresnet was – after sumptuously organised funeral rituals – indeed buried in his unfinished but monumental tomb in the newly founded cemetery at Abusir.

Květa Smoláriková*
Czech Institute of Egyptology
Charles University
Prague
E-mail: Kveta.Smolarikova@ff.cuni.cz

*Corresponding author.

REFERENCES

- ASTON D. A., ASTON B. G., 2010: *Late Period Pottery from the New Kingdom Necropolis at Saqqara*. London–Leiden.
- BAREŠ L., 1999: *The shaft tomb of Udjahorresnet at Abusir*. Abusir IV. Universitas Carolina Pragensis.
- BAREŠ L., SMOLÁRIKOVÁ, K., STROUHAL, E., 2005: The Saite-Persian Cemetery at Abusir in 2003. *Zeitschrift für ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde* 132: 95–106.
- BAREŠ L., SMOLÁRIKOVÁ, K., 2011: *The Shaft Tomb of Menekhibnekau. Volume I: Archaeology*. Praha, Český egyptologický ústav.
- BOTTI G., ROMANELLI P., 1951: *Le sculpture del Museo Gregoriano Egizio*. Vatican.
- FRENCH P., 2003: An Embalmer's Cache of the Late Dynastic Period. *Mitteilungen des deutschen archäologischen Instituts Abteilung Kairo* 59, 221–224.
- IKRAM S., LOPEZ-GRANDE M. J., 2011: Three Embalming Caches from Dra Abu el-Naga. *Bulletin de l'Institut français d'archéologie orientale* 111, 205–228.
- LAUER J.-PH., ISKANDER Z., 1956: Données nouvelles sur la momification dans l'Égypte ancienne. *Annales du Service des Antiquités Égyptiennes* 53, 167–195.
- LICHTHEIM M., 1980: *Ancient Egyptian Literature. Volume III: The Late Period*. University of California Press.
- POSENER G., 1939: *La première domination perse en Égypte. Recueil d'inscriptions hiéroglyphiques*. BdE 11. Cairo.
- SMOLÁRIKOVÁ K., 2006: Some remarks on embalmers' caches from the Saite-Persian cemetery at Abusir. *Aegyptus et Panonia* III, 261–270.
- SMOLÁRIKOVÁ K., 2016: Late Saite-Early Persian assemblages of Pottery from Abusir. In: B. Bader, Ch. Knoblauch and E. Ch. Köhler (Eds.): *Vienna 2 – Ancient Egyptian Ceramics in the 21st Century*. Pp. 545–555. *Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta* 245, Leuven, Peeters.
- VERNER M., 1982: Excavations at Abusir, Season 1980/1981 – Preliminary report. *Zeitschrift für ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde* 109: 157–166.