Alexander Ilin-Tomich

Egyptian Name Scarabs from the 12th to the 15th Dynasty

Contributions to the Archaeology of Egypt, Nubia and the Levant

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Cover illustration: Scarab of Mentuuser. Mid- to late 13th Dynasty. Found in the 18th Dynasty tomb of Neferkhaut in Asasif. Metropolitan Museum of Art 35.3.47. Public domain photograph from https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/560176 (accessed on 14.02.2023).

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Editor's foreword

This book is the result of meticulous, systematic, and painstaking analysis of Egyptian Middle Kingdom and Second Intermediate Period private and royal name scarabs, in a way which has never been done before. It is a period in which many things remain in the dark, a time in which it is most difficult to write history. As a result, additional sources like scarabs with names and titles are most valuable. The problem is that most of the scarabs come from the antiquities trade. However, due to extensive fieldwork activity in recent decades, the number of objects in controlled contexts has increased. Nevertheless, additional problems must be addressed, such as the reuse of scarabs as seals and amulets in much later contexts. Whenever possible, the author has taken pains to autopsy the seals or, at least, to secure drawings and photographs of the back. And, because of his refined methodology and rigorous typology, he was able to discard premature interpretations of seal contexts. On the other hand, he presents us with riddles that are yet to be solved. In short, it is the most up-to-date analysis of scarab-shaped seals and their impressions from one of Egypt's most disputed periods. As historical source material, they are indispensable. Nobody working in this period should overlook this volume as a source book.

For the editorial board
Manfred Bietak

Preface and acknowledgements

Absurdly numerous, indistinguishable from one another, hard to keep account of, and devoid of any obvious aesthetical and historical value, Egyptian scarabs hardly rank high on the list of most museum curators' favourite object types. Yet, when studied systematically, private-name scarabs can provide a vital link between historical reconstructions based on written sources and those based on the material culture.

Inscribed scarabs captivated earlier scholars and collectors, who built up large collections of mostly unprovenanced scarabs stemming from the antiquities market and originally from undocumented, and to a large extent illicit, excavations. Yet, since the 1970s, the focus of scarab studies has shifted towards design scarabs from recorded archaeological contexts, and largely those excavated in the Levant. This book aims to leverage the approaches developed by scholars of Levantine and other excavated scarabs to reinvestigate the regional and chronological distribution of features among the name scarabs of the Middle Kingdom and the Second Intermediate Period.

One motivation to write this book was the question of whether Middle Kingdom and Second Intermediate Period inscribed scarabs were manufactured centrally at the royal residence, as often suggested in the literature. For one thing, this hypothesis, which serves as basis for reasoning in recent research, lacks solid ground. For the other, the centralised production of scarabs contrasts with the practice of the localised production of private stelae and other monuments, revealed in my previous research. To address the issue, I had to examine first-hand a representative selection of private-name scarabs kept in various museums, since most private-name scarabs remain unpublished, but for the inscribed base.

This travel-intense undertaking became possible as part of a project funded by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation at the Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz. The Humboldt Foundation kindly provided financial support for the publication of this book. I undertook additional research trips and wrote much of the book alongside my research on Middle Kingdom personal names and on Egyptian titles, funded by the Fritz Thyssen Foundation, which covered some of the travel and proof-reading expenses. To both foundations I express my deep gratitude as well as to the Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, which provided a grant to cover the substantial part of proof-reading expenses. I am grateful to the editors of the Contributions to the Archaeology of Egypt, Nubia, and the Levant for making it possible to publish this book in the series.

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Some theses of this book were presented as lectures and conference papers in recent years, and I am utmost grateful to the organisers and audiences of events in Leipzig, Vienna, Moscow, Münster, and again in Vienna for their feedback. I very much appreciate the suggestions and criticisms provided by the two anonymous reviewers of this book.

My family bravely withstood my new obsession with scarabs, and my son Alexander Jr. has repeatedly assisted me in processing digital photographs of scarabs and making scarab replicas in modelling clay throughout his primary school years.

Introduction

In terms of numbers, scarabs make up a significant fraction of Egyptian antiquities in most modern museum collections. Scarabs studied in this book (also called scarab seals to distinguish them from other scarab-shaped artefacts) are small, wearable objects crafted in the form of scarab beetles (family *Scarabaeidae* in biology) that have a flat base, often decorated or inscribed, and a hole bored through the length. This hole allowed wearing the scarabs by attaching them to a thread or a metal fixture. Scarabs were most commonly made of glazed steatite, various semi-precious stones, or glazed composition (Egyptian faience). Occasionally, wood or glass and other vitreous materials were used.

Scarabs as a distinct object type emerged in Egypt in the First Intermediate Period and were manufactured through to the Ptolemaic period. This study focuses on the apex of private-name scarabs, the Middle Kingdom and the Second Intermediate Period. The work follows the convention, by which the period from the reign of Senusret III to the end of the 13th Dynasty is named "Late Middle Kingdom", and the period when the foreign 14th–15th Dynasty reigned in the north of Egypt and the 16th–17th Dynasty in Thebes is termed "Second Intermediate Period". While it is possible that, at some point, rulers of the 13th Dynasty reigned concurrently with the foreign kings in the north and (or) the Theban kings in the south,[1] this is not relevant for the present study, because the last kings of the 13th Dynasty ruling after *Mr-nfr-rˁ* Ay are not attested on scarabs (unless one assumes a much longer overlap between the 13th Dynasty and concurrent dynasties – this possibility favoured by several scholars is discussed in Chapter 3). Early Middle Kingdom is subdivided into 11th Dynasty, early 12th Dynasty (Amenemhat I and Senusret I) and mid-12th Dynasty (Amenemhat II and Senusret II). Late Middle Kingdom is subdivided in four periods: late 12th Dynasty (Senusret III to Neferusobek), early 13th Dynasty (up to the reign of *Sḫm-rˁ Swȝḏ-tȝwj* Sobekhotep III), mid-13th Dynasty (*Ḥˁ-sḫm-rˁ* Neferhotep I to *Ḥˁ-nfr-rˁ* Sobekhotep IV), and late 13th Dynasty (after *Ḥˁ-nfr-rˁ* Sobekhotep IV). The internal chronology of the Second Intermediate Period in the north of Egypt in terms of kings and dynasties remains unclear.

In the Middle Bronze Age, Egyptian scarabs already influenced the production of similar-shaped artefacts in the East Mediterranean – in Crete[2] and in the Levant.[3] The precondition for this development was the high value attached to Egyptian scarabs by the neighbouring cultures, evidenced by numerous finds of Middle Kingdom scarabs abroad.

The primary function of scarabs in Egypt during the Middle Kingdom remains a matter of debate. Most often assumed are uses as seals, funerary amulets, non-funerary amulets or talismans, and personal ornaments. Proponents of the view that the primary function of scarabs was amuletic or talismanic refer to the semantics of visual motives and formulas used in scarab decoration as well as to the form of the scarab itself and its significance.[4] Another argument, put forward at the early stages of this discussion, was that scarabs emerge in the archaeological record prior to scarab impressions, which were deemed to appear only in the Late Middle Kingdom. This would imply that historically the original function of scarabs was not sealing.[5] However, as excavations of First Intermediate Period and 11th Dynasty settlements provide a growing number of scarab impressions from these early periods, this argument does not hold true.[6] Adherents of the primarily administrative use of scarabs highlight the fact that seemingly funerary motives occur on seal impressions from non-funerary contexts, testifying to the administrative use of scarabs regardless of the significance of the formulae and that the distribution of sealings naming different agents and institutions is consistent with the functions of the settlement zones where the sealings are found.[7] As well as epithets deemed related to the afterlife, also complete offering formulae occur on sealings from non-funerary contexts. An eloquent example cited by Joseph Wegner is a sealing of Ib (Fig. 1) from the mayoral residence in Wahsut (Building A) featuring a complete offering formula.[8] This scarab impression closely matches a scarab, now in the British Museum (BM EA30529, Fig. 2). Were it not for the impression found in an administrative building, the scarab could have been interpreted as unrelated to administrative practices due to its text.

On the balance of the available evidence, it is impossible to say whether scarabs were originally conceived as seals; nevertheless, one can safely assume that many scarabs were used as seals throughout the Middle Kingdom and the Second Intermediate Period and that some were primarily worn as personal ornaments. That the significance of scarabs extended beyond the purely administrative and ornamental uses is apparent, although it appears counterproductive to disjoin benefits and blessings signified by the formulae

1 Ilin-Tomich 2014b; 2016.
2 Phillips 2008, 108–139.
3 Keel 2004; Ben-Tor 2007a.
4 See, most recently, Ben-Tor 2018a, 289–290.
5 Ben-Tor 1995, 82.
6 Shubert 1998, von Pilgrim 2001, Adams 2005, 443; Ben-Tor 2007a, 5.
7 Wegner 2018, 252–253; Smith 2001, 2004; Wegner 2001.
8 Wegner 2018, 252 fig. 13.14.

Fig. 1 Scarab impression of Ib, Wah Sut SA.20803, published in Wegner 2018, 252 fig. 13.14. Photo provided by Joseph Wegner.

and images on scarabs from the administrative and decorative uses in attempts to pinpoint the primary function of these artefacts. It is likely that the antithesis between the amuletic and the administrative functions was non-existent in ancient Egypt.

In terms of decoration on the base, Middle Kingdom scarabs can be divided into three categories: so-called design scarabs, royal-name scarabs, and private-name scarabs. Design scarabs generally lack hieroglyphic inscriptions on the base. This category also includes scarabs with formulae, such as *rdj-r*ᶜ and anra-scarabs,[9] and those with meaninglessly arranged hieroglyphs, including debased royal names. Royal-name scarabs and private-name scarabs bear names of kings and non-royal persons, respectively, accompanied by titles and epithets. In literature, there remains uncertainty about the scarabs of the royal family members. Geoffrey Martin included in his catalogue of private-name scarabs those that belong to the sons and fathers of kings, but not those of their daughters, wives, and mothers.[10] In this book, I group all these scarabs under private-name scarabs as they are not comparable to royal-name scarabs in terms of titles and epithets. On the contrary, they may feature epithets of the type *k3, nfr, w3ḥ* (discussed in Chapter 1), which are characteristic of private-name scarabs. As will be addressed in Chapter 6, scarabs featuring female members of royal families under the 13th Dynasty exhibit a side-type (d8 in terms of the classification devised by Tufnell and Ward) that does not occur on contemporary royal-name scarabs but is common on private-name scarabs.

As a side note, heart scarabs, used exclusively as funerary equipment, also appear in the Late Middle Kingdom, even though only a few examples are known from this epoch;[11] yet heart scarabs, which mostly lack a hole bored through the length, do not belong to scarab seals and therefore fall outside the scope of this book.

Scarabs of each category could be used in different ways. Design scarabs prevail both among scarabs found in burials and among those used to create impressions found in late Middle Kingdom contexts of non-funerary nature. According to Brigitte Gratien, impressions of design scarabs make up ca. 92% of sealings on the Elephantine and ca. 88% in Mirgissa.[12] A similar distribution is observable at Lahun, where design scarab impressions comprise 88% of the corpus examined by Olga Tufnell, whereas royal-name and private-name scarab impressions account for 4% and 7%, respectively.[13]

Private-name scarabs are a distinctive object group of the Middle Kingdom. Most known private-name scarabs and their impressions date from late Middle Kingdom and the Second Intermediate Period. In the latter epoch, almost all known examples can be associated with the rulers of the northern part of Egypt. While still attested during the 18th Dynasty, private-name scarabs give way to other kinds of seals with names in the New Kingdom.[14] Middle Kingdom private-name scarabs were used for sealing, as evidenced by numerous impressions from Mirgissa, Wahsut, Lisht, Uronarti, Elephantine, Lahun, and other sites, and they are also attested in funerary contexts. There is little evidence to confirm the hypothesis that the private-name scarabs found in Middle Kingdom burials were deposited along with the person whose name is inscribed on the scarab, for almost no private-name scarabs were found together with other inscribed objects bearing the same name. One unique case is Lisht North tomb 453,[15] where a jasper scarab and a golden scarab plate,[16] both bearing the name of the chamber-keeper (*jtj-*ᶜ*t*) Ameny (*Jmnjj*), were found along with a shabti[17] bearing the

9 For the former, see Keel 1995, 240–241 and Ben-Tor 2007a, 20–21 and pl. 12 (1–4); for the latter, Richards 2001 and Ben-Tor 2007a, 83–85, 133–134, 165–166, pl. 35 (25–38), 55–56, 82–84.

10 Martin 1971.

11 Quirke 2001/2002; Miniaci, Haynes, and Lacovara 2018.

12 Gratien 2004b, 75.

13 Based on the data presented in Tufnell 1975.

14 Smith 2018.

15 Bourriau 1991, 17.

16 MMA 15.3.135a and 15.3.135b (Martin 195–196; museum website). A list of museum websites referred to in this work, is given at the end of the book, after the References. As distinct from museum websites, museum databases referred to in the work are internal museum databases, not accessible online.

17 Cairo JE 44954, Schneider 1977, I, 182; Figs. 3, 6.

Fig. 2 Scarab of Ib, BM EA30529.
Photo by A. Ilin-Tomich. Courtesy Trustees of the British Museum. 18×12×8 mm.

same name and title.[18] Yet, in many cases, scarabs were deposited much later than the original owner's[19] lifetime. One inscribed scarab-plate is known that was fitted to a scarab bearing a different name, apparently in an attempt to appropriate a valuable scarab by attaching a new name to it without re-cutting the scarab (plate Field 239003-2 and scarab Field 239003-1[20]). It is also not clear whether only the persons named on scarabs used the scarabs with their names for sealing. There is textual evidence from late Middle Kingdom of people using their own seals to seal private deeds or to confirm transactions. Judging from the archaeological evidence, these seals were most likely scarabs as prevailing kind of seals used in the Late Middle Kingdom. For instance, there is a passage in the 13th Dynasty papyrus Brooklyn 35.1446, verso text B, lines 29-31:[21]

jw jsṯ rdj.n=j n [ḥmt=j] ȝwt jr m ntt ḥr rdjt n ḫȝ n wḥmw n [njwt rsj m] ḫtmt ḥr ḫtm=j ḥnʿ ḫtm n ḥmt=j Snb.tj=sj

And I gave [my wife] a gift, made according to that what is in (the document) given to the bureau of the reporter [of the Southern City as] a sealed document, (sealed) with my seal and the seal of my wife Senebtisi.[22]

Similarly, in a letter from Lahun, UC 32216:[23]

(a list of goods)
… m šd ḥr ḫtm n bȝk jm
... as a withdrawal (sealed) with the seal of the humble servant.

It is, however, hardly imaginable that scarabs bearing the names of Egypt's top officials, which are found in large numbers, could all be simultaneously held by the person named on them. More likely, they would have been distributed to a variety of people or offices. Best attested are scarabs of treasurers, both from the 13th and the 14th–15th Dynasty.[24] The series of scarabs with the names of 13th Dynasty treasurers Senebsumai, Senbi, and Nebersehui include 39, 11, and 9 scarabs, respectively; 14th–15th Dynasty treasurers Har and Peremhesut are known from 144 and 38 scarabs, respectively. Whether or not all people who held such seals with the names of the highest officials were entitled to use them for sealing, remains unclear. Yet, impressions of scarabs belonging to these series are also known. Sealings of Senebsumai were found in Wahsut[25] and Mirgissa.[26] Sealings of Senbi are known from Wahsut[27] and Ashkelon.[28]

A closely related issue is the use of royal-name scarabs. Such scarabs can be found in private burials, mostly in those of a date significantly later than the reigns of the respective kings. Royal-name scarabs were also used for sealing, and their specific role in the administration and the temporal framework of their usage remain unclear: who used them for sealing and when. Much controversy arises around the finds of sealings with the names of kings who are not thought to be contemporary in the same contexts, as discussed in Chapter 3 below.

18 Another notable exception is the decorative silver scarab MMA 40.3.12 (Martin 390; museum website) found on the body of Wah (name recorded on coffin MMA 20.3.202, which contained the body), located beneath the portico of the early Middle Kingdom tomb of Meketre in Asasif (Roehrig 2002, 14–23 and Roehrig 2003); the scarab bears the names of both Wah and Meketre on the back. The material and the inscription on the back make the scarab of Wah a very special case.

19 As it is never known who actually owned a scarab, I use the term "owner" to designate the person whose name is inscribed on a scarab regardless of who actually possessed the artefact.

20 Museum website.

21 Hayes 1955, pl. XIV, 116; Eyre 2013, 262.

22 It remains a matter of speculation whether one of the two known scarabs with the female name *Snb.tj=sj*, Cairo JE 75055 (Martin 1608) and MMA 10.130.296 (Martin 1609) belonged to the woman referred to in this text.

23 Collier and Quirke 2002, 152–153.

24 For an overview, see: Grajetzki 2001, 10–11, 18–20, 30, 35–36.

25 Wegner 2007, fig. 154 (16–17).

26 Gratien 2019, no. 3-66, 3-67, 3-90.

27 Wegner 2007, fig. 154 (23).

28 Ben-Tor and Bell 2018, no. 17a-b.

Whereas scarabs of different categories were used in a similar way, private-name scarabs have more to offer to a researcher than design and royal-name scarabs. They bear names, and often titles and/or epithets. This textual data can be analysed in connection with external textual sources from a wide spectrum. Orthography, lexicography, anthroponymy, and prosopography can provide a context for private-name scarabs. When re-contextualised through the textual evidence, private-name scarabs can serve as valuable comparative material for studying scarabs of other categories – primarily design scarabs, which are the most common type in archaeological record and are thus relevant for dating their archaeological contexts. Design scarabs can be compared to private-name scarabs in terms of sculptural features and designs. Thereby, private-name scarabs can provide a link between the reconstructions based on written sources and those based on material evidence. When it comes to the geography of scarab production and use, private-name scarabs can be assigned to specific regions based on titles, anthroponymic and prosopographical data, unlike other categories of scarabs. These possibilities remain underexploited in previous research. Since the fundamental study by Geoffrey Martin,[29] private-name scarabs have been receiving less scholarly attention than other types of scarabs of the same period, particularly design scarabs from archaeological contexts in Egypt and the Levant.[30] Scholars developed advanced approaches for classifying and studying royal-name and design scarabs, based on the analyses of single sculptural features (sides, head, elytra, plates, suture; see Fig. 3 for the depiction of the principal parts of scarabs) and of the combinations of features (the workshop approach[31]). The focus on uninscribed scarabs, which is also seen by some as a welcome reversal of decades of scholarly interest being focused exclusively on name scarabs,[32] has greatly advanced the methods of studying scarabs and the understanding of their history. In this study, I attempt to take the best of both worlds by combining the rich data from textual sources, to which name scarabs can be anchored through inscriptions, and the methods of analysing scarab features elaborated by scholars of design scarabs. I leverage the established data concerning Middle Kingdom administration, prosopography, and anthroponymy to assign private-name scarabs to specific sub-periods and regions, analyse their sculptural features based on photographs and first-hand examinations in order to better understand the timeline and the geography of production of private-name scarabs and thus elaborate and refine criteria for establishing the date and origin of scarabs from their features. These criteria should be applicable to both name and design scarabs. Scarabs, other than those with private names, are studied alongside as comparative material, for royal-name scarabs provide the benchmark for dating scarabs, and design scarabs with recorded find spots enrich the evidence on the geographical spread of scarabs.

Re-examination of scarabs in museums

Martin laid the foundation for modern private-name scarab research by publishing a catalogue of non-royal inscribed scarabs, comprising 1670 scarabs beside several hundred seal impressions and seals of other types.[33] The catalogue included drawings of bases of almost all scarabs; other facets are not reproduced. Instead, Martin introduced classifications of sides and backs, ascribing each scarab he examined to a particular side and back class. As with all classifications, this system covers only a limited set of features; moreover, it can only partially be translated into the classes defined by Tufnell and Ward, which are used for royal-name and design scarabs. Ultimately, ascribing scarabs to types is always fallible; hence, the classifications not supported by published photos are drawings provide a poor basis for research. Therefore, wherever possible, this study avoids relying on class-codes determined by other scholars, favouring first-hand observations and reliable reproductions.

For all these reasons, the scarabs had to be documented anew for the present study based on published – preferably photographic – reproductions of sides and backs and on the examination of unpublished scarabs in museums and archives. I was able to examine personally, completely or in part, the private-name scarab collections at Aberdeen University Museums, the Egyptian Museum and Papyrus Collection (Berlin), the Egyptian Museum (Cairo), the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (Cambridge), the Oriental Institute Museum (Chicago), Museum August Kestner (Hannover), Roemer and Pelizaeus Museum (Hildesheim), the British Museum (London), the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology (London), the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts (Moscow), the Brooklyn Museum (New York), the Ashmolean Museum (Oxford), the Egyptian Museum (Turin), as well as the only private-name scarab stored in in the Oriental Museum (Durham). I did not get a chance to access the rich collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and some smaller collections; hence, the selection is inevitably narrower than that in the

29 Martin 1971.

30 Tufnell 1984; Ward and Dever 1994; Keel 1995; Mlinar 2001b; Mlinar 2004b; Ben-Tor 2007a.

31 In scarab studies, the approach was pioneered by Keel 1989a; 1994, 207–212 and Mlinar 2001b; 2004b; see a review in Boonstra 2020.

32 Richards 2001, 8–10.

33 Martin 1971.