

The Fishtail Knife Amulet UC14892/2 in the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, University College London

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Introduction

Interpretations of material culture remains are constantly revised in the social sciences, in line with the changing theories of human behaviour. Archaeologists have a duty to show more consideration to the fact that artefacts are invested of meaning through complex social interactions. Meaning is shaped by social actions; objects change through their existence and ‘...they often have the capability of accumulating histories so that the present significance of an object derives from the persons and events to which it is connected...’ (Godsen and Marshall 1999: 170). Realistically, within the wide unpredictability of human behaviour, there has not been a convincing single theory able to explain the links between a society and its objects. The life-history approach of Tringham (1994) is considered, however, a classical attempt to investigate and explain these processes. Objects of the past have been shown to be neither passive nor made of inert material. It is with social interactions, involving people and objects, that meaning is created. Only with the incorporation of archaeological data with textual and ethnoarchaeological records can we add further observations for satisfactory explanations of artefacts. Amongst the material collected by Sir Flinders Petrie, there is a remarkable collection of amulets, votive objects and personal ornaments of magico-religious significance. A large number of the artefacts of this collection are, not surprisingly, without a satisfactory interpretation of their function. The subject of these notes is a curious example of one of these ritual objects: the mud amulet UC14892/2, an imitation in alluvial mud of a flint, so-called ‘fishtail knife’. The reader is invited to visit the catalogue of the Petrie Museum at <http://petriecat.museums.ucl.ac.uk/> for pictures and a summary description of this type of artefact.

In 1927 Blackman published the results of her study on the life of upper Egyptian farmers. The continuity of religious and cultural values between ancient and modern *fellahins* is remarkable: ‘...women often have a craving to eat mud during their pregnancy. They go to the bed of a canal and break into small pieces some of the clods of mud that have partially dried up since inundation. They keep a store of these in their pockets or tied up in their veils, so that they may have them handy when a craving comes upon them. These pieces of mud are called *tin ibliz* (alluvial mud)...’ (Blackman 1927: 62). Mud in ancient Egypt has always had a significance that for us today is difficult to comprehend. As a substitute of a flint fishtail knife, UC14892/2 was placed around the neck of the dead, as part of the funerary rituals by which a person could be reborn. Its magical task was to remind the reborn dead person that the umbilical cord had been cut and a new opportunity of an afterlife was available.



Figure 1. UC14892/2. Copyright: Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, UCL.

UC14892/2 is part of a set of three objects, ink labeled UC14892, /1/2 and /3 (Adams 1974: 37-38, pls. 27; 31, cat. no. 184; 1974b: 132, 166). It is made of alluvial mud and measures as follows: L.(max): 129 mm, W.(max): 70 mm. The precise place of origin of the amulet under discussion is unknown; the report of the second campaign of excavations at Kom el-Ahmar (Quibell and Green 1902: 26, 51, pls. 48b, 47) mentions four clay models from one archaic tomb (no number) in the cemetery graves: ‘...in one tomb the skeleton of a dwarf was found; in another were painted clay models of flint knives...’ Amongst many others, these artefacts were part of a second share of objects brought to England and exhibited at University College of London in the summer 1899.

Currently displayed in the museum’s Main Room case E, top shelf (Adams 1990: 7), UC14892/2 has an irregular shape. The surface is somewhat discolored and the edges are slightly damaged in places. One of the two tails has been rejoined in the past. The paint is generally faded, and both tails are intense red ochre (10R 5/6 ‘red’), the colour of blood, life and protection. Next a band of carbon black (7.5YR 2/0 ‘black’) defines the base of the handle. The center is left unpainted, and is of a light grayish coloration (7.5YR 6/2 ‘pinkish grey’). The reverse maintains the same pattern, although much faded. Large mineral and organic inclusions of scattered limestone particle, sand, and chaff are visible on the surface of the paste that appears to the naked eye to be poorly mixed. The rounded top end is once again painted in carbon black and incorporates an irregular perforation of approximately 5 mm diameter located in the centerline of the body. This hole points to some means of suspension: it could be that the object was originally wearable by means of a string or cord, perhaps of reed or flax, which

deteriorated through time and has not survived. There are no inscriptions or incisions, except the accession number (U.C.), written in ink and covered by a protective layer of Paraloid B72 acrylic resin. The composition of the alluvial mud has not been examined, and at present there are no certain indications as to whether the object was originally sun-dried or kiln-fired.

UC14892/1/2/3 could be either small parts of the funerary assemblage of a single burial, or more probably parts of a multiple burial situation from some place in the cemetery. The cemetery HK43 of Kom el-Ahmar, 'the red mound,' was a distinctly separate burial ground for the lower class. It is about 1.3 km south east of an enclosure known as the fort of king Khasekhemwy (Dynasty II, c. 2750-2650 BC). Studies on osteological materials have shown that people buried in this context were fit and robust. Evidence of strong muscle attachments in skeletal remains, cases of herniated disks and arthritis confirm, in agreement with the archaeological evidence, that it was a typical cemetery of a workforce (Matovich 2005: 8-9). These burials had already been greatly disturbed by decades of scavenging by sebakh diggers and dealers when Quibell started excavating the site in the winter of the 1897-1898 field season. Unfortunately, this cemetery remained poorly documented, and the stratigraphy and distribution of finds in Kom el-Ahmar is ambiguous, lacking data on status, gender, and age of the tombs' owners as well as organic and skeletal materials which remained unexplored.

In general, the squatting position of the bodies with heads towards the south and facing west, the use of mats for lining the graves and of skins to cover the bodies (Quibell and Green 1902: 26) seemed the common features of a cemetery for working class people. At HK43, items of funerary equipment, essential for the hereafter, consisted mainly of pottery vessels, cosmetic palettes and small artefacts such as flint tools and amulets of different materials. The emergence of a series of mud artefacts from HK43 at Kom el-Ahmar suggests the existence of multiple burials, or possibly different graves with the same ritual items. The Egyptian and Nubian collection of the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford holds a similar set of mud artefacts, where Cat. No. E1070 is comparable to the mud dagger UC14892/1, and E1069 is almost identical to UC14892/2 and UC14892/3 (Payne 1993: 23-24, fig. 17, cat. 84, 85). Since none of these objects appear in the first excavation report (Quibell 1900), both sets must be part of Green's finds from the second season of work (winter 1898-1899), and from the same unnumbered cemetery of graves.

Future examination of the fabrics with Neutron Activation Analysis (NAA) (Hester 1973) and further comparison of the amulets in the London and Oxford collections could help to determine whether, for instance, they were objects of mass production at Hierakonpolis. At first appearance, given the size, the properties of the fabric and the generally unappealing look, it seems reasonable to assume that UC14892/2 was not intended to be worn as an amulet in daily life. Ceramics recovered from the cemetery for dating the artefact suggest the Naqada II Early to Mid Gerzean Period (c. 3650-3300 BC) (Petrie Sequence Dating 38-62).

Elaborate tools such as flint fishtail knives undoubtedly demonstrate craft specialization and a high level of know-how early in Predynastic Egypt. The study by A. M. Roth (1992) and the recent discovery of a complete fishtail knife from Burial 412 in the Predynastic cemetery HK43 at Hierakonpolis (ancient Nekhen), has aroused renewed interest in these curious artefacts. This fishtail knife implement has been associated with the Ritual of the Opening of the Mouth where the tool, presented to the face of the deceased, seems to have an active role in magical funerary rituals (Piankoff 1968; Faulkner 1969).

An object acquires value through links to one or more individuals over time, just as an individual's status depends on possession of specific objects. In this view, the contributions of Van Walsem (1978), Roth (1992), and recently Hikade and Friedman (2004) can be of use for the correct interpretation of artefacts such as fishtail knife amulets. UC14892/2 appears in Petrie's 1920 book *Prehistoric Egypt*:

In a Prehistoric grave at Hierakonpolis were clay models of a knife and two forked lances... These are colored red on the blade and the tips of the lance... The red represent flint covered with blood... (Petrie 1920: 25, pl. 28, no. 14)

Most of the amulets of this type seem to have been designated for ceremonial use and subsequent post-burial deposition in funerary assemblages. The majority have been broken into two or more fragments, damage that is probably intended to 'disarm' them, as also reported for example at Naga ed-Der in tomb N

7491 (Brunton 1937: 90-1). Many fishtail knife amulets from burials were intentionally broken as prescribed by funerary rituals, and it seems highly improbable that a natural breakage occurred in all three objects in the case of the UC14892 set.

What we know of the birth of the Naqada culture in Upper Egypt (c. 4800 BC) is characterized by ex-hunter-gatherer groups which evolved into farming communities, and then progressed into a complex society. Archaeological evidence, mainly from cemeteries, suggests that a core area of the Naqada culture that extended from Abydos to Hierakonpolis in southern Egypt (Bard 1994: 267). Within that society, the ruling elite was constantly in search of status symbols such as flint implements, of rare manufacture and materials, and therefore clear symbols of a superior position in a stratified society (Hikade 2004: 10). Perequin *et al.* (1988: 308) for example have discussed how the time invested in polishing flint artefacts during the Neolithic era (in an agricultural community similar to Hierakonpolis) made the tools highly prized, and valuable exchange objects of high status. Ancient Egyptian Predynastic society seems to have been relatively unequal, with a system of competing units and class distinctions where access to resources was restricted by territorial ownership. A small elite that controlled available resources, would have limited the opportunities available to the masses (Leone *et al.* 1987: 511). Craft specialization in ancient Egypt was thus one of the methods of encouraging economic inequality among population. Together with the control of

procurement of good quality materials, this was an expression of the power and prestige of a minority.

Mortuary practices that developed in Egypt show a significant continuity in the rituals and symbolism that formed the basis of the Egyptian belief in a material afterlife. Today, most of the remains of this ancient culture speak of a desire for life after death. The essential idea of these rituals was that death could be conquered. In Predynastic and Dynastic Egypt, childbirth must have been high risk, with perhaps up to 30% neonatal mortality (Harer 1994: 1054). The act of cutting the umbilical cord must have been performed with all necessary magic instruments and rituals. As an object of simple manufacture, UC14982/2 may represent a case of the optimization model derived from theories of economics.

Ordinary individuals in the past acquired objects as a function of their costs/benefits, satisfying their needs within a budget of time and resources. The production of bifacial lithic artefacts, and to a certain extent their exchange if any existed, could be reconstructed based on two assumptions. Firstly that some of the lithic production was carried out by craft specialists, and secondly that the distribution of certain classes of lithic artefacts was controlled by a small segment of the society, with socio-political inequality as a result. By investigating the formal characteristics of fishtail knives, their geographical and chronological distribution and deposition in settlement and burial sites, it appears clear that they had a high cost of acquisition, and required a high labour expenditure and skill level for manufacture. Durable artefacts are more appropriate for carrying social information than those with short use-lives (Forenbaer 1999: 14).

It has been proposed that associated portable artefacts reflect the level of development of the societies that produced them, including the identity of the people and the complexity of their social organisation (Forenbaer 1999: 6). UC14892/2 demonstrates that what could not be acquired in precious materials could be symbolically replaced in funerary assemblages, by an amulet made of malleable and cheap material.

The use of amulets of alluvial mud and other materials in substitution of fishtail knives was also widespread during the New Kingdom. Bruyere (1926: fig. 81; 1927: fig. 47) reported a 19th dynasty example of a fishtail knife, also a kind of amulet, and Aldred (1968: 81) mentioned such an example in Tomb KV55. Based on the work of Janssen, *Commodity Prices*, it might be possible to price a flint fishtail knife. A *sft* 'knife' - the word is used from the Middle Kingdom onwards for knife and sword - was probably a butcher's or kitchen knife with one sharpened edge (Janssen 1975: 324). The term *sft* comes from the verb 'to slaughter,' this being the main use of such a single-edged knife, although there are also pictures where double-edged implements are used. Two prices are known for a *sft*, both from the 19th and 20th dynasties, from Hierat. Ostr. 72, 1, 19, and Hierat. Ostr. 86, 1, 7, of one *sft* for three *dbn*, Three *dbn* (deben) is what might reasonably be expected as an indicative price for a flint fishtail knife in the New Kingdom (about half the price of an axe). This also seems reasonable when compared

to the price of a pair of sandals during the 19th dynasty of 1-3 *dbn*, an ivory comb for 2 *dbn* (Janssen 1975: 303), or a female donkey at around 30 *dbn* on average (Janssen 1975: 170-172). If one projects this evidence backwards, assuming the minimum cost of the material, the labour related to the treatment (value-added) and the remarkably stable prices in ancient Egypt, it can clearly be argued that artefacts such as UC14892/2 are examples of objects for the lower classes, commonly available at very low prices.

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