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Source: *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Jan., 1915), pp. 8-9

Published by: [Egypt Exploration Society](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3853858>

Accessed: 16/07/2014 13:13

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A REMARKABLE BURIAL CUSTOM OF THE OLD KINGDOM

By T. ERIC PEET, B.A.

THE photograph shown in Plate IV Fig. 1 illustrates two (Brit. Mus. Nos. 53897, 53898) of a number of mud balls found in the sand filling of a small mastaba in Cemetery D at Abydos in the season 1912-13¹. The original number of the balls must have been about 40, and they lay mostly in the north-east corner (by river reckoning) of the sand core of the mastaba (No. 124). In diameter they vary from 20 to 40 centimetres and they are all approximately circular. With a few exceptions all have the surface covered with numerous impressions of a reticulated seal, probably a cylinder. The squares of this grille design are sunk on the balls, while the network between them is at the original level of the surface of the balls. The design on the cylinder was probably six squares in width each square being of equal breadth. The length of the design round the curved face of the cylinder cannot be determined with certainty owing to the incompleteness of the impressions on the extremely convex surface of the balls. It is, however, clear that two adjacent rows of the squares were considerably longer than the rest. The probable design is shown in Fig. 2.

On the surface of the balls, after the marking of the grille, was roughly incised with a sharp pointed implement, sometimes as many as six times on the same ball and with little regard to direction, the group of signs of which eight examples are shown in Fig. 3. As to the meaning of these signs I have no suggestions to offer, nor is it even certain which way up they should be read though, as will be shown later, they are probably right as placed here. It is not impossible that they are meant for hieratic forms, but of this there is no proof. The two inner groups on the lower line seem at first sight to differ entirely from the rest; they only occurred on one single ball while the rest, with unimportant variations, occurred over and over again. Only one ball was wholly uninscribed.

The substance of the balls is ordinary Nile mud with which have been intentionally intermixed certain impurities such as small fragments of charcoal, pottery, and, in one case, a piece of bone. Towards the centre the balls are much blackened by carbonaceous matter, and at the centre, in the three balls opened for examination, were in two cases fragments of reed (possibly papyrus) and in the third case a tiny piece of linen cloth. The fragments were so fragile that they disintegrated on exposure to the air. They were badly discoloured and it was impossible to observe whether they had been inscribed.

¹ *Cemeteries of Abydos*, III, p. 20.

Fig. 1. Scale $\frac{1}{2}$.

Fig. 2. Scale $\frac{1}{4}$.

Fig. 3. Scale $\frac{3}{4}$.

Mud balls from Old Kingdom mastaba, Abydos.
(Brit. Mus. Nos. 53897, 53898.)

Remarkable as these objects are in themselves they become still more so from the fact that precisely similar balls were found by Garstang at Reqaqna in a small hole bored into the top of the wall of mastaba 50 near its north-west corner¹. They seem to have been on the whole larger than those from Abydos, but they have the same grille pattern impressed on them. They bear also in incision the same group of signs, to which, however, are added below two animals (or a man and an animal) apparently fighting, and below this again a crocodile. From the arrangement of these groups it is probable that the signs on the Abydos balls are to be read in the position in which we have drawn them in the figure. Mastaba 50 is perhaps to be attributed to the Vth Dynasty² and a similar or slightly earlier date is to be given to the Abydos mastaba.

It would be foolish to dogmatize with regard to the purpose of these objects. That they were connected with the rites of burial is however fairly certain, and we may conjecture that they had some magical significance.

¹ Garstang, *Third Egyptian Dynasty*, pp. 32, 59. Pl. XXX. Some of these balls are still preserved in the museum of the Institute of Archaeology, Liverpool. Professor Garstang kindly opened two in my presence and found them to contain, like our Abydos examples, small pieces of cloth made up into pellets.

² So Reisner, *Naga ed Der*, I, p. 138.