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EGYPTOLOGICAL Hypotheses

Funerary cones

Hypotheses about their purpose

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1 Funerary cones[1]

During the periods when Thebes (modern-day Luxor/Al Uqsur) served as the royal capital, the Egyptian elite had their private rock-cut tombs constructed in several necropolises west of the Nile in the Theban region. Such tombs typically consisted of an outer forecourt and the inner tomb complex carved into the terraced rock. The main entrance was framed with stone blocks; the rest of the façade consisted of a white-plastered mud-brick wall (Fig. 1e).[2] In Dra‘ Abu el Naga, some tombs featured a small mud-brick pyramid above the main entrance.[3]

Funerary cones, sometimes referred to as “sepulchral cones” or “funerary stamps” in older literature, were architectural elements made of fired clay that were used in the construction of Theban rock-cut tombs. The most common shape was a cone measuring about 15–20 centimeters in length.[4] Less common were the shapes of an elongated pyramid or a broad wedge (Fig. 1b).[5] These elements were built into the mud-brick façade in horizontal rows above the front entrance of the tomb.[6] They were embedded, pointed end first, between the unfired bricks, so that the base areas remained visible as circular discs in the plaster (Fig. 1e). In tomb wall scenes and on certain papyri,[7] depictions of tomb entrances with rows of red discs, presumed to be funerary cones,[8] can be seen (Fig. 3). There is no evidence to support the assumption that funerary cones were also placed in the floor of the tomb forecourt. Groups of funerary cones found in tomb forecourts originate from disintegrated façade fragments (Figs. 2f,g).[9]

Funerary cones were produced in large quantities. The number of specimens found so far ranges between 700 and 800.[10] Many can no longer be attributed to a tomb, leading to the

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1 Ref 1; Ref 2, pp 10–14.

2 Exceptions include the saff tombs of the Middle Kingdom, where the burial complex is entered through a portico supported by pillars.

3 This is attested in papyri, e. g. the Book of the Dead of Nakht (British Museum EA10471,7; EA10471,14; Fig. 3). King Nubkheperra Intef (Dyn. 17) had a complete pyramid complex at Dra‘ Abu el-Naga (Ref 3, p 240).

4 Ref 15, p vi. The longest funerary cone from El-Tarif dating from the Middle Kingdom measures 52.5 centimeters, which is 1 royal cubit (Ref 4, p 21).

5 Ref 8, p 28 (fig 8).

6 This was described in 19th-century excavation reports, for example by A. H. Rhind and H. Salt (Ref 2, p 12).

7 Ref 8, pp 26, 28 (figs 1–4); Tomb of Nebamun and Ipuky, TT 181 (Ref 5, p 5 [fig]); Book of the Dead of Nakht (British Museum EA10471,7; EA10471,14); Book of the Dead of Nebqed (Louvre N 3068, fragment 01).

8 Contra K. Zenihiro 2009 (Ref 2, pp 14–15).

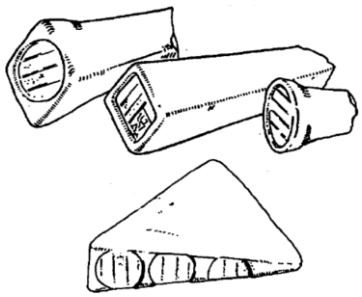
9 Cf. Ref 6, p 59. Contra K. Zenihiro (Ref 1, section „Original Locations“).

10 Ref 7, p 19. In the 19th and 20th centuries, many of them were taken out of the country for collections or as travel souvenirs (Cf. Ref 2, p 25). In 1951, the Oriental Museum in Durham acquired a collection of more than 600 funerary cones (Ref 5, pp 5–6).

assumption that there are still a great many undiscovered rock-cut tombs in the Luxor area. The cones were mostly formed from Nile clay and fired in such a way that they developed a very hard-fired red shell and a more porous core that remained black due to the absence of oxygen (Fig. 1c). A few were made on a potter's wheel and are hollow.[11] The outer surface was coated with white or red slip (Figs. 1a,c).[12] In the New Kingdom, the base area of a funerary cone was decorated with a seal impression, which lists the name and titles of the tomb owner or the tomb-owning couple (Fig. 1d) and may include a short religious saying. Wedge-shaped funerary cones, and occasionally ordinary mud bricks, were stamped with several such seal impressions on their front surfaces (Fig. 1b).

Fig. 1: Funerary cones: Forms, material, inscription, position

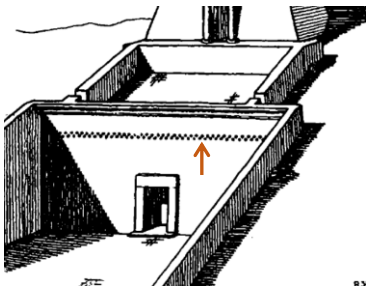
a) Funerary cones



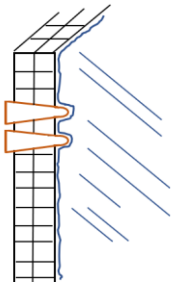
b) Special shapes: Pyramidal cone, wedge

c) Fragment with white slip coating

d) Example of a seal impression on the base area[13]



e) Horizontal rows of funerary cones in the tomb façade (reconstruction)[14]



f) Position in the façade (author's hypothesis)

11 Ref 2, p 12, figs 13, 14; Ref 7, pp 35–38; Ref 15, p vi.

12 Only a few unusual funerary cones are blue, yellow, or black (Ref 1, section "Colours").

13 Davies & Macadam #70 = Daressy #47 (Ref 2, p 69). Text: "The revered one before Osiris, accountant of the nourishments of Amun, Nebamun, justified."

14 Artistic reconstruction by H. Ricke of the tomb 288/9 at Dra' Abu el-Naga (Ref 8, p 29, fig 6).

2 Previous and current hypotheses about their purpose[15]

Before 1827, the funerary cones were mistaken for large stamp seals. J. Champollion (1827) attributed to them the function of signs or grave goods. In the mid-19th century, excavators speculated that they were tesserae, identifying marks, or ornaments. Between 1862 and 1934, several scholars expressed the view that the funerary cones were symbolic offerings, such as bread loaves or pieces of meat. At the beginning of the 20th century, the horizontal rows of funerary cones were interpreted as a frieze. Some modern authors have also endorsed this interpretation. M. Etienne (2009) introduced the religious aspect of the deceased's regeneration into the discussion. He pointed out that at sunrise, the sun's rays strike the seal impressions to revive the name of the deceased.[16] E. Schiaparelli (1884) was the first to interpret the circular base surfaces of the funerary cones as symbols of the sun disk. He noted that on some examples, the worship of the sun god or a solar barque is depicted as part of the inscription.[17] Several 20th- and 21st-century authors agreed with this view. Others regarded the entire cones as symbolic sunbeams. According to the suggestion by H. E. Winlock (1928), which still has supporters today (most recently J. Vivó, 2022), the funerary cones were clay imitations of wooden roof beams. L. Borchardt and colleagues (1899, 1934) suggested that the cones served to reinforce the mud-brick façade.

3 Author's hypothesis

3.1 Arguments against previous suggestions

The Egyptians would not have had to embed clay cones in the wall to create a decorative frieze. The suggestion that funerary cones served merely as a medium for inscriptions must also be rejected. Examples from the early Middle Kingdom were still uninscribed.[18] Furthermore, the funerary cones were embedded at a height that prevented even literate visitors from reading the text (Fig. 2e). The function of "information boards" was fulfilled by funerary steles erected on either side of the tomb entrance.

The overhead placement of funerary cones is also difficult to reconcile with the assumption that the funerary cones were symbolic sacrificial breads or foundation deposits. The cone-shaped objects on a model sacrificial table from the Middle Kingdom, which C. Leemans (1840) interpreted as funerary cones, are more like pieces of pastry or

15 For more details see Ref 1, section „Functions".

16 In ancient Egypt, a person's name represented that person to a much greater extent than it does today.

17 Cf. Ref 15, pp 53–54.

18 Ref 5, p 4 (citing L. Manniche, 1988).

wrapped offerings.[19] The approximately 12-centimeter-long clay "votive nails" found in a stone temple wall built around 2100 BCE in the Sumerian city of Girsu (southeastern Iraq) are, despite their comparable shape, not analogous to the Egyptian funerary cones. They bore religious cuneiform texts on their lateral surfaces and were inserted into holes between stone blocks near the ground.[20]

The frequent white slip coating of the funerary cones does not fit with solar symbolism, especially since this color did not stand out against the white-plastered tomb façades.[21] In addition, I cannot discern any sunbeams or, come to that, a phallic symbolism[22] in these bulky cones, which are almost completely hidden within the wall and whose tips point toward the rock.

To mimic roof beams, Egyptian architects could have used real wood in that dry climate. After all, the entrance doors were also made of wood. Imported wood, as a status symbol, would certainly have suited the noble tomb owners.[23]

In my opinion, the hypothesis put forward by Borchardt and colleagues, that the funerary cones were intended to reinforce the mud-brick façade, is a step in the right direction. However, in their publication, they incorrectly referred to the cones and wedges as "*friesziegel*" (ornamental bricks), "*eckziegel*" (corner bricks), or "*pflastersteine*" (cobblestones).[24]

3.2 Improving structural stability

Walls made of unfired mud bricks, built in one or two layers against a rock face, are not very stable. The mortar used in such masonry consisted of Nile mud with additives (sand, straw, organic materials) and held the mud bricks well together within a layer. However, it did not have enough adhesive strength to create a highly stable bond between the rear layer and the rock face. In addition, Thebes's desert climate featured a relatively large temperature difference between day and night of about 16–18°C.[25] The periodic expansion of the outer layer of sun-exposed mud bricks against the rock wall behind led to shear forces at the interfaces. At the same time, the dead weight of the mud bricks

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19 Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, object no. AT 99. Cf. Ref 1, section "Original Locations" (citing Boeser 1910). Contra C. Leemans 1840 (Ref 9, pp 104–105).

20 The Walters Museum, object no. 48.1456; Musée des Beaux-Arts de Lyon, object no. 1943-26.

21 Papyrus British Museum 10471

22 Ref 10, p 394 (citing Hodges, Tyler, and Cull).

23 In an old photograph of a Middle Kingdom tomb at Deir el-Bahari, the circular base areas of uninscribed funerary cones are covered with carelessly scribbled cross-, star-, and circle-shaped lines (Fig. 2e). These are K. Zenihiro's main argument for the roof-beam hypothesis (Ref 1, section "Functions," subsection "My view"). I do not consider them to be original.

24 Ref 8.

25 Temperature readings for Luxor (Ref 11).

exerted a constant downward tensile force. During the New Kingdom, the area of the Theban necropolises was more humid than it is today due to the annual floods, the numerous lateral branches of the Nile, and the artificial canals used for boat access to the temples and palaces.[26] At night, moisture probably condensed in the cracks between the bricks and the rock, weakening the mortar bond there over time. A limestone cladding would have further compromised structural stability due to the additional weight and the extra interfaces. Enclosure walls, pylons, and the superstructures of shaft tombs[27] were built more solidly to avoid static problems (Figs. 2b,d). For example, the boundary walls of the forecourt of the rock-cut tomb of Puyemra (TT 39, El-Khokha) were built in wide steps and could therefore be clad with stone (Fig. 2d).

Structural stability can be improved by securely fastening the mud-brick layers of the façade near the top and additionally anchoring them to the rock face. These measures reduce the shear forces at the interfaces. The funerary cones can therefore be viewed as nails or pegs used to reinforce the cohesion of the wall layers. To fulfill their purpose optimally, their tips had to extend into the rock face (Fig. 1f). Such a façade would have been even more durable if funerary cones had also been incorporated in vertical rows. Unfortunately, the façades of the Theban rock-cut tombs had already collapsed by the time the tombs caught the attention of archaeologists. The funerary cones lay among the wall fragments and bricks. The rock surface, which was once covered by the mud-brick façade and has since been exposed to the sun, wind, and sand for a long time, is eroded (Fig. 2c). It is therefore no longer possible to prove that there were once artificial recesses that had held the tips of the funerary cones.[28] A tomb ruin with funerary cones *in situ* is now only documented in photographs (Figs. 2e).[29]

Clay funerary cones were inexpensive. Thanks to a special firing technique that produced a hard outer shell and a more porous core, they were less prone to cracking and could effectively absorb shear and tensile forces. Even the highest-ranking officials could not have afforded rows of bronze funerary cones.

The white or colored slip coating on the funerary cones does not necessarily indicate a purely decorative purpose. The ancient Egyptians liked to combine practicality with beauty. It is possible that the cone was dipped in slip only immediately before being installed in the wall, in order to take advantage of its adhesive properties within the masonry. If the funerary cones had served a purely decorative purpose, the Egyptians

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26 Ref 12.

27 E.g. Ref 3, pp 236, 240–241.

28 Selected tombs, such as TT 39, underwent a modern façade renovation for tourism purposes to ensure safety.

29 Ref 13, pp 6, 7 (figs 4, 5).

would have continued using similar cones during the Ramesside period in the Delta as well. However, that was not the case. Almost all sites where they have been found are located in southern Upper Egypt.[30] This observation supports my hypothesis that they served a structural purpose, particularly in mud-brick façades of rock-cut tombs. Beginning in the Ramesside period, cities in the Delta became royal residence cities (Piramesse, Tanis, Bubastis, Leontopolis, Sais). Rock-cut tombs for officials were, by their very nature, not feasible on the flat alluvial plain. Funerary cones were not required for the construction of the thick-walled superstructures of elite crypt tombs.

In the pre- and early dynastic excavation layers at Buto in the northwestern Delta and at Hierakonpolis in southern Upper Egypt, ceramic nails – smaller, but similar in shape to funerary cones – have been unearthed. However, they were not found in a context associated with mud-brick architecture.[31] A technical function in wattle-and-daub construction cannot be ruled out. It is possible that the technique of joining wall layers with ceramic nails is very old and was rediscovered by the Egyptians during the Middle Kingdom for construction of the façades of rock-cut tombs.

[30] Thebes, Rizaqat, Armant, Naqada, and Abydos; two came from Lower Nubia (Zenihiro, World, section „Geographical Distribution“; Ref 2, pp 15–19; Ref 15, p vii).

[31] Ref 14, p 13.

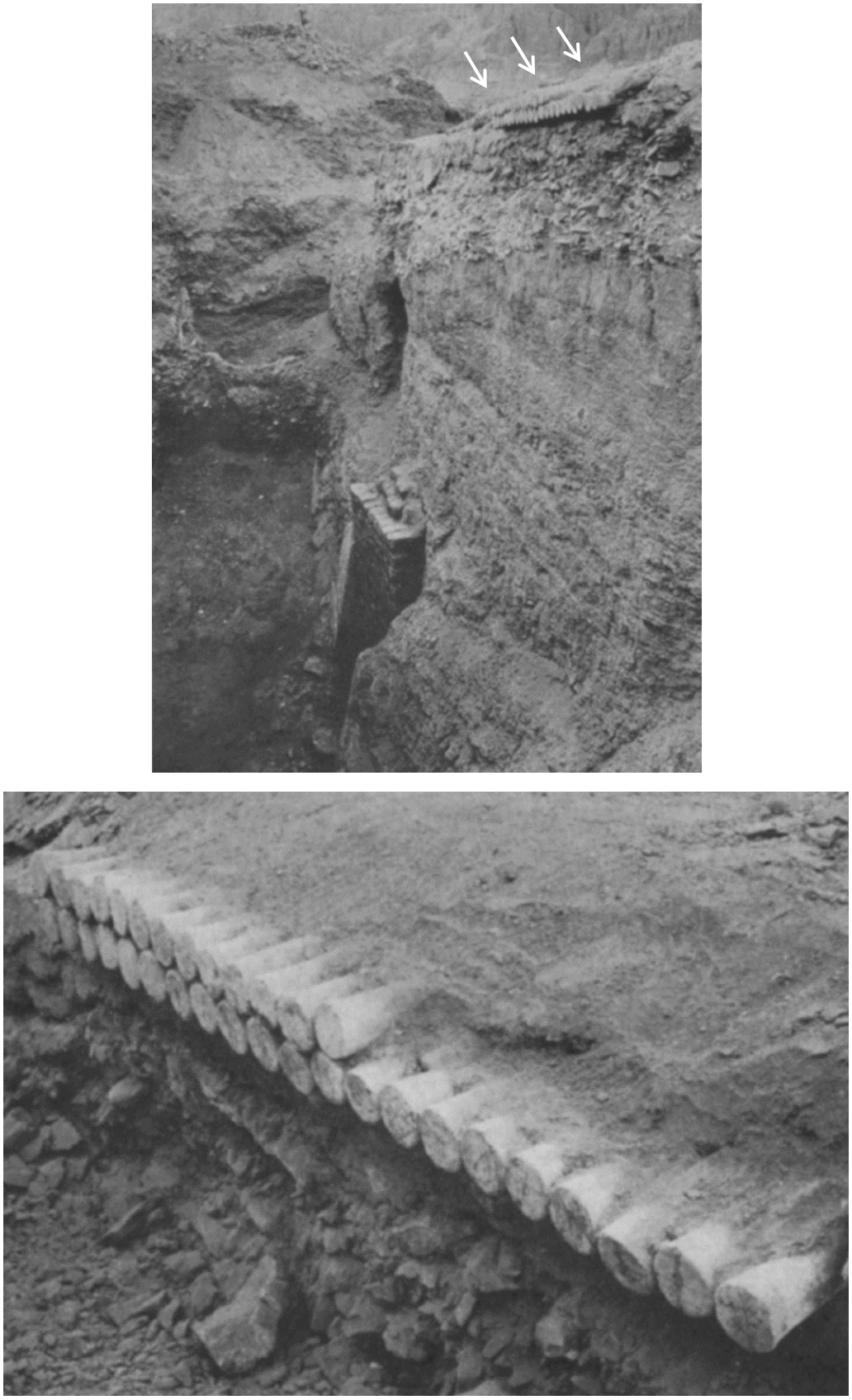
Fig. 2: Rock-cut tombs in the wider area of Thebes

a) Necropolis of El-Khokha

b) Necropolis of Draʿ Abu el-Naga

c) Tombs of Senenmut (TT353, Dyn. 18) and Nespakashuty (TT312, Dyn. 26, right), Deir el-Bahari

d) Tomb of Puyemra (TT 39, Dyn. 18), El-Khokha



e) Unidentified tomb with preserved funerary cones (Dyn. 11), Deir el-Bahari

f) Funerary cones embedded in a façade fragment of the tomb of Ity and Neferu (FIP), Gebelein

g) Funerary cones buried under debris of the tomb of Tjanuny (TT 74, Dyn. 18), Sheikh Abd el-Qurna

Fig. 3: The royal scribe Nakht[32] and his Ba on their way to the tomb entrance.
Book of the Dead of Nakht (Dyn. 18), possibly from Draʿ Abu El-Naga, British Museum EA10471,7

Abbreviations

AVDAIK: Archäologische Veröffentlichungen, Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Abteilung Kairo; BCE: Before Christian era; DAIK: Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Abteilung Kairo; Dyn.: Dynasty; eds: editors; Fig./Figs.: Figure(s); FIP: First Intermediate Period; JEA: The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology; MDAIK: Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts, Abteilung Kairo; MMA Bulletin: The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin; no.: number; p/pp: page(s); Ref: Reference; TT: Theban tomb; Vol.: Volume; ZÄS: Zeitschrift für ägyptische Schrift und Altertumskunde.

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[32] Not to be confused with Nakht, the owner of the tomb TT 52 in Sheikh Abd el-Qurna.

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Photo and image credits

Fig. 1: a) Funerary cones. Photo: Rama, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Funerary_cone#/media/File:Cones-IMG_6354.JPG (CC BY-SA-2.0 fr; accessed April 14, 2026).

b) Special types of funerary cones. Drawing: Ref 8, p 28, fig 8 (nos. 7–9, 5), rearranged.

c) Fragment of a funerary cone. Photo: Oriental Museum of Durham (accession no. 1951.52), from Ref 5, p 29.

d) Seal impression on a funerary cone of Nebamun (Davies & Macadam #70 = Daressy #47, tomb undiscovered). Drawing: Ref 2, p 69.

e) Arrangement of funerary cones in rows on the tomb façade, using tomb 288/9 in Draʿ Abu el-Naga as an example. Drawing: H. Ricke, Ref 8, p 29, fig 6, cut to size (CC 0).

f) Hypothetical position of funerary cones in the tomb façade. Own drawing.

Fig. 2: a) Necropolis of El-Khokha. Private photo.

b) Necropolis of Draʿ Abu el-Naga. Private photo.

c) Tombs of Senenmut (TT 353, Dyn. 18) und Nespakaschuty (TT 312, Dyn. 26), Deir el-Bahari. Photo: Olaf Tausch, https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Datei:Felsengr%C3%A4ber_Deir_el-Bahari_08.jpg (CC BY 3.0, accessed April 22, 2026).

d) Tomb of Puyemra (TT 39, Dyn. 18), El-Khokha. Photo: Heather McCarthy,

https://www.flickr.com/photos/133502210@N06 (CC BY; accessed April 7, 2026).

e) Unidentified tomb with preserved funerary cones, Dyn. 11, Deir el-Bahari. Photos: Ref 13, pp 6, 7 (figs 4, 5)(CC 0).

f) Tomb of Ity and Neferu (FIP), Gebelein, funerary cones embedded in a façade fragment. Photo: E. Schiaparelli (1911)/Museo Egizio, Archivio photografico, Photo 3/82 (CC 0).

g) Tomb of Tjanuny (TT 74, Dyn. 18), Sheikh Abd el-Qurna, funerary cones buried under debris. Photo: DAIK; Ref 6, plt 52a.

Fig. 3: Book of the Dead of Nakht (Dyn. 18), British Museum EA10471,7. Photo: British Museum, https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/Y_EA10471-7 (CC0; accessed May 02, 2026).