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Food Containers as a Specific Class of Old Kingdom Stone Vessel Production

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ABSTRACT: Food containers represent a specific class of Old Kingdom stone vessel production that has so far only been attested in a limited number of tombs. A small number of previously unpublished fragments have recently been identified amongst the remains of the burial equipment of Queen Khentkaus II, who was buried in the pyramid field at Abusir. Most of these newly identified fragments are currently housed at the Náprstek Museum in Prague, whilst three are kept in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo.

The Prague material was examined, documented, and compared with similar archaeological evidence. The analysis considers not only two-part stone containers intended to hold actual food offerings, but also their imitations – solid stone objects of identical shape lacking an internal cavity. This study therefore aims to address the broader context of stone vessel production associated with food offerings deposited in Old Kingdom burial chambers.

KEYWORDS: Ancient Egypt – Old Kingdom – stone vessels – food containers – burial equipment – offerings – Khentkaus

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Introduction

Burial equipment constituted an essential means of sustaining the afterlife in ancient Egyptian culture. Considerable effort was therefore afforded to equipping burial apartments with all the objects necessary to ensure a comfortable existence in the hereafter. In addition to items intended for ritual purposes, sustenance formed a crucial component of burial assemblages. The nourishment could be provided either in the form of real offerings or symbolically, and often both approaches were employed simultaneously. Accordingly, tomb superstructures were frequently decorated with wall scenes depicting various production workshops or offerings themselves, whilst burial chambers were furnished with food and drink provisions. These offerings, however, could be either real or symbolic, as both were considered equally effective in fulfilling their desired function.

Stone food containers were developed in the Old Kingdom period and became a distinctive, relatively rare component of the burial equipment. The term 'food container' refers to a two-part vessel designed to hold specific types of food and deliberately shaped as a stone imitation of the offering it contained. Typically, such vessels consist of a shallow, relatively flat base part and a domed lid, both hollowed to accommodate the offering inside. Both parts were usually finished with flat rims and often fit together precisely. However, examples of pieces that were used together despite not fitting also exist (e.g., the burial chamber of Inti-Pepi-ankh in Abusir). In some cases, particularly in the non-royal contexts, functional two-part stone food containers were replaced with model versions. These models were produced from the same kinds of stone and closely imitated the form and size of the original vessels. The principal distinction lies in their function. Model containers are solid and lack any internal cavity.

Both functional and model stone food containers were made either from travertine² or limestone. The preference for light-coloured materials was likely intentional, reflecting symbolic associations with purity. The choice of material may also have played a role in the social stratification of Old Kingdom society. Travertine was harder and more difficult to work. Moreover, it was quarried in Middle Egypt, at a considerable distance from the main political centre. For these reasons, it was regarded as more prestigious than the softer and more readily available limestone.³ Differences in size may likewise reflect the social status of the tomb

2 There has been a long discussion on the terms that shall be used when describing this material. In the past, it was called 'alabaster', but the geological analyses have proved that it is of a different nature than the European material traditionally described as 'alabaster'. Therefore, it was reinterpreted as 'travertine' by James A. Harrell (1990). Rosemarie Klemm and Dietrich D. Klemm (2008, p. 147) disagreed with the terminology and prefer to call the material 'alabaster calcite'. Barbara G. Aston (1994) distinguishes between 'calcite', 'travertine' and 'alabaster'. Recently, the material was discussed by Tina Köster (2012).

The author of this article discussed the problem with the geologist Václav Čílek, and decided to use the term 'travertine', which is nowadays generally accepted and widely used.

3 Klemm and Klemm 2008, pp. 23–145.

owner, although it is not always true. For example, the containers discovered in the burial chamber of King Raneferef are the smallest known from royal contexts.

Stone food containers of Queen Khentkaus II

As noted above, only a limited number of assemblages are known, and even fewer have been fully published. The present study introduces one of the most recently identified examples. The assemblage comes from the burial equipment of Queen Khentkaus II, the wife of King Neferirkare and probable mother of Kings Raneferef and Niuserre, all of whom were buried in the Abusir pyramid field. The queen's pyramid complex was discovered in 1976 and subsequently excavated over the course of a long-term excavation that lasted until 1985. Although the monument had suffered repeated looting episodes and extensive damage due to stone quarrying activities, parts of the original burial equipment of the queen survived within her burial chamber until the archaeological excavation of the Czechoslovak Institute of Egyptology.⁴ The initial publication of the complex focused primarily on its architectural layout and archaeological context, with additional attention given to masons' marks, seal impressions, papyrus archive, and fragments of relief decoration. Other categories of finds, however, remained unpublished and await detailed analysis.

As a part of an ongoing study of Old Kingdom stone vessel production, the author of the present study compiled a list of all stone artefacts recovered from the queen's pyramid complex. While a full analysis of this material is still in progress, one group of objects was quickly recognised as particularly significant – fragments of two-part stone food containers. Given their rarity and elite association, these objects merit closer examination within the broader framework of Old Kingdom stone vessel production and distribution.

The burial chamber of Queen Khentkaus II was cleaned in two main phases. The first intervention took place in 1978, when the chamber was opened and most of the debris removed. During this phase, four fragments of a travertine lid in the form of cattle ribs were collected in the eastern part of the burial chamber (Find Nos. 274/AC14/1978, 381–383/AC14/1978).⁵ In 1980, during the second phase of cleaning, when a depression in the southern part of the chamber – a probable floor recess originally intended to house the queen's canopic jars – was emptied, four additional fragments of travertine food containers were discovered. Two of these probably belonged to the cattle rib type (Find Nos. 11/AC14/1980,

4 Verner 2001.

5 In the original documentation and earlier publications, all the finds from the tomb of Khentkaus II were labelled with the earlier tomb code 'A'. It was later with the new code system of the Czech Institute of Egyptology changed to AC 14.

12/AC14/1980), whilst the remaining two fragments, of oval form, may have originated from either an oval bread or duck/goose container (Find No. 9a,b/AC14/1980). All the fragments were preserved in a highly fragmentary condition and could not be physically joined. Consequently, it is difficult to determine the exact number of original vessels. It can thus be stated with confidence that at least one set for ribs was present, as well as one part of an oval bread/cake or poultry container.

Catalogue of the stone food containers of Queen Khentkaus II [Pls. 1–2]

Find No. 274/AC14/1978 (Náprstek Museum, Inv. No. P 5762) [Pl. 3]

Material: white travertine

Preserved dimensions: l. 7.5 cm, w. 4.0 cm, h. 4.1 cm

This small fragment likely derives from a vessel that probably belonged to a container of rectangular shape, as indicated by its relatively straight (rather than rounded) rim. The side wall is slightly inclined rather than vertical. A clearly visible groove filled with a light green substance runs along the junction of the base and wall on the interior. The inner surface was not fully smoothed, and a straight groove remains visible there.

Given its small size, the fragment cannot be classified with certainty. It may represent a side fragment of the lower or upper part of the rib-shaped container, but an attribution to the scapula type cannot be excluded.

Find No. 381/AC14/1978 (Egyptian Museum Cairo)

Find No. 382/AC14/1978 (Egyptian Museum Cairo)

Find No. 383/AC14/1978 (Egyptian Museum Cairo)

Find No. 9a/AC14/1980 (Náprstek Museum, Inv. No. P 6449) [Pl. 3]

Material: yellowish travertine

Preserved dimensions: l. 13.4 cm, w. 7.4 cm, h. 4.6 cm

This larger fragment is of oval form and retains a roughly finished interior surface. Numerous tool marks from a tubular drill used to hollow the vessel's interior remain visible. These marks were subsequently filled in with yellow plaster.

The size of the fragment allows a tentative identification as either the upper or lower part of an oval bread/cake container, or less probably as a part of a poultry-shaped vessel.

Find No. 9b/AC14/1980 (Náprstek Museum, Inv. No. P 6449) [Pl. 3]

Material: white travertine

Preserved dimensions: l. 9.0 cm, w. 5.4 cm, h. 4.3 cm

A smaller fragment that was found together with Find No. 9a/AC14/1978 also preserves a part of an oval rim. The transition between the base and the wall is rounded and not sharply defined. The interior preserves several boring traces that were left on the vessel's surface after its smoothing. These are two linear grooves and one circular mark created by a tubular drill. All these features were likely originally filled with yellowish plaster.

Due to its fragmentary nature, precise identification is not possible. The piece could be a fragment of the lower or upper part of an oval bread/cake container or a container in the shape of a duck/goose.

Find No. 11/AC14/1980 (Náprstek Museum, inv. No. P 6451) [Pl. 4]

Material: white travertine

Preserved dimensions: l. 6.8 cm, w. 4.5 cm, h. 3.8 cm

This fragment represents a corner portion of a rectangular vessel. The exterior is carefully modelled, preserving part of an elongated bulge and a second adjacent bulge separated by a groove; a feature characteristic of rib-shaped containers. The outer surface is well smoothed, while the interior retains clear traces of drilling. A circular depression is visible near the corner, and a vertical drilling trace is preserved along the inner wall. These features were produced by tubular drilling techniques (tubular drill and boring stones). The walls of the vessel rise vertically from the base. Part of the flat rim appears to have been damaged and subsequently restored with plaster.

Despite its small size, the distinctive exterior modelling allows confident identification as a fragment of the upper part of the rib-shaped container.

Find No. 12/AC14/1980 (Náprstek Museum, Inv. No. P 6460) [Pl. 4]

Material: grey-brownish travertine

Preserved dimensions: l. 16.4 cm, w. 12.3 cm, h. 4.2 cm

This is the largest preserved fragment and represents a corner portion of the lower part of a rectangular vessel. The exterior surface is largely flat but rises toward the front end, which is decorated with deep grooves. The outer surface is relatively well

smoothed, while the interior retains tool marks likely created with a pick. These run in the direction of the vessel's longer wall. Some of the grooves remain unfilled, whereas others were filled with yellow plaster. The side wall of the originally elongated vessel rises vertically from the base, with a groove marking the transition between the base and wall on the interior.

The shape and modelling clearly identify this fragment as part of the lower portion of a rib-shaped container.

Food containers in Old Kingdom royal contexts [Tab. 1]

Given their exclusive character, stone food containers are most appropriately examined first within royal burial contexts. Indeed, a number of examples have been found inside the Old Kingdom pyramids. Due to extensive ancient looting inside the royal monuments, all of these assemblages are incomplete and thus provide only limited insight into the original number and the composition of individual sets. Nevertheless, the available evidence clearly indicates that stone food containers were intended to hold offerings of poultry (most likely ducks and geese), meat (haunch, shoulder, and ribs) and bread or possibly also a kind of rounded cake.

From the chronological point of view, the containers associated with Queen Khentkaus II represent the earliest currently known examples. Comparable finds have yet to be identified in royal burials of the Fourth Dynasty or the early Fifth Dynasty. The material from the pyramid complex of King Neferirkare, the royal spouse of Queen Khenkaus II, remains insufficiently published and cannot be fully evaluated.⁶ Khentkaus II is considered the mother to two sons and heirs, Raneferef and Niuserre. More substantial evidence is available from the burial chamber of King Raneferef. Excavations conducted by the Czechoslovak Institute of Egyptology revealed two preserved food containers and three fragments in the debris covering the burial chamber floor.⁷ These finds were only listed without descriptions in the subsequent publication, but their photograph was provided [Fig. 1]. These pieces, made of travertine, differ notably from those of Khentkaus II in that they do not represent a specific food type. Instead, they are of a simplified conical or pear-like form with smooth external surfaces and visible circular drilling traces preserved internally. In this respect, their classification is difficult. Moreover, their relatively small size (10.0 and 13.0 cm in length) further distinguishes them from other royal examples.⁸

6 Borchardt 1909, p. 68.

7 Verner et al. 2006, pp. 26–27.

8 Also these stone containers are today stored in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo and will be, hopefully, documented and studied in detail by the author of this article in the future.

Tab. 1. List of evidence on stone food containers from royal contexts.

Tomb	Site	Dynasty	Material	Size	Type	Bread/ cake	Poultry	Rib	Haunch	Shoulder	Unidentified shape
Khentkaus (AC 14)	Abusir	5	travertine	large-size	two-part	1		1 or 2			
Raneferet (AC 3)	Abusir	5	travertine	model	two-part						2 pear-shaped halves + 3 fragments
Lepsius XXIV (AC 22)	Abusir	5	travertine	large-size	two-part	1	1	1	1		many fragments
Inenek-Inti	Saqqara	6	limestone	large-size	two-part	1	3	1	2	1	
Ankhnespepi II	Saqqara	6	limestone	large-size	two-part	2	5	2	2	1	
Ankhnespepi II	Saqqara	6	travertine	large-size	two-part	2	3 or 4	1	1	2	
Ankhnespepi III	Saqqara	6	limestone	large-size	two-part	1	5	2	1	1	
Merettes II	Saqqara	6	limestone	large-size	two-part	2	6	2	2	1 or 2	
Behenu	Saqqara	6	limestone	large-size	two-part	1	1 or 2		3	1	
Neith	Saqqara	6	limestone	large-size	two-part						
Neith	Saqqara	6	travertine	large-size	two-part						
Wedjebten	Saqqara	6	limestone	large-size (?)	two-part						

The burial equipment of King Niuserre remains largely unknown, and probably not much survived.⁹ In contrast, more substantial material was recovered from the burial equipment of his wife, who is thought to be buried in the anonymous pyramid Lepsius XXIV. Archaeologists collected a large number of fragments that originally formed stone food containers inside her eternal dwelling. All were made of travertine and represented a variety of offerings.¹⁰ Some of the fragments are too small to enable the precise identification, whereas others are of clearer shapes, such as Find Nos. 43/AC22/94 (ribs; lower part), 48/AC22/94 and 60/AC22/94 (a haunch; upper part?), 55/AC22/94 (a rounded bread loaf?; upper part, rounded rim inside and squarish rim outside), and 59/AC22/94 (a duck/goose?; lower part).¹¹ Their sizes were hard to determine as only two of them could be reconstructed to their complete or almost complete length. The lower part of the ribs measured 18.0 cm in length, the haunch 20.0 cm in length, the bread loaf 10.3 cm in diameter and the lower part of duck/goose 13.3 cm in length. Contrary to the containers of Khentkaus II these were definitely of smaller sizes.

There is a lack of evidence for a couple of the following generations of kings and their royal consorts. A significant expansion in the evidence occurs in the later Sixth Dynasty, particularly in the pyramids of queens associated with King Pepi I and Pepi II at South Saqqara.¹² In these contexts, both travertine and limestone containers are attested, although limestone predominates in most assemblages. Only the burial of Queen Ankhnespepi II, a spouse of Pepi I and the mother of King Pepi II yielded a combination of both materials. All the other queens had their food containers made only of limestone (mostly painted yellow or red). Queen Behenu's (a spouse of either Pepi I or Pepi II) burial apartment retained merely fragments, but the burial chambers of Inenek-Inti (a spouse of Pepi I), Ankhnespepi II, Ankhnespepi III (a spouse of King Pepi II and the mother of King Neferkare), and Meretites II (a spouse of King Neferkare) still contained complete or almost complete vessels as well as some fragments. Neither containers, nor their fragments, were discovered in the burial complexes of the other spouses of Pepi I, Queen Nubunet, the Western Queen, and Queen Mehaa.

The preserved assemblages include five principal types; bread or cake, ribs, haunch, shoulder, and duck or goose. Their quantities vary considerably between tombs. Inenek-Inti had an oval bread, one piece of ribs, two haunches, one shoulder, and three ducks/geese. Ankhnespepi II had four bread loaves (two in travertine and two in limestone), three pieces of ribs, (one in travertine and two in limestone), three haunches (one in travertine and two in limestone), three shoulders (two in

9 Borchardt 1907, p. 139.

10 Krejčí et al. 2008, pp. 104–108.

11 In the original documentation and earlier publications, all the finds from the tomb of the queen from Lepsius XXIV were labelled with the earlier tomb code 'J'. It was later with the new code system of the Czech Institute of Egyptology changed into AC 22.

12 Minault-Gout 2019, pp. 147–170.

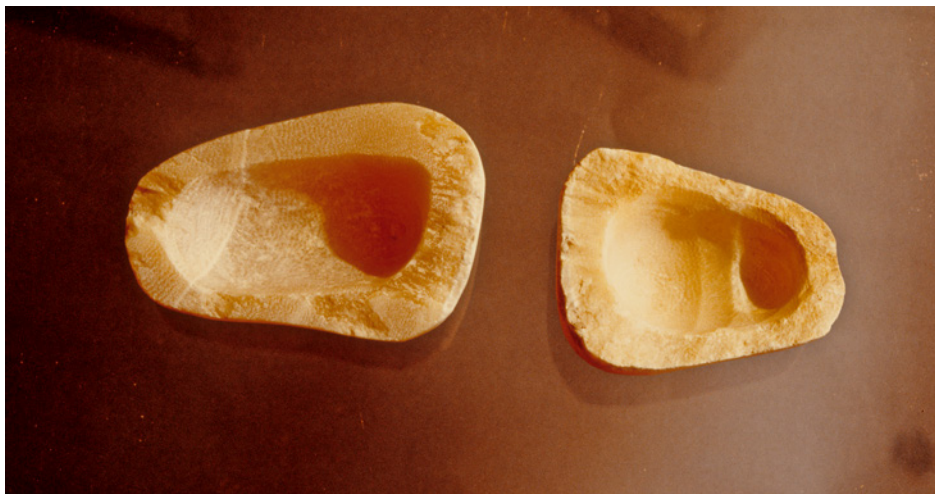


Fig. 1. Stone food containers of King Raneferef. (Photo: Milan Zemina).

travertine and one in limestone), and eight ducks/geese (three or four in travertine and five in limestone). Ankhnespepi III had one piece of bread, two pieces of ribs, a haunch, one shoulder, and five examples of poultry. Meretites II had two pieces of bread, ribs, and haunch, one or two shoulders, and six ducks/geese. Behenu was once provided with at least one piece of bread container, some haunches (six fragments were collected), a container in the shape of a shoulder and one or two in the form of poultry. Some containers were preserved in fragments only, however, it can be stated that both the limestone and travertine containers were of similar size, some of them surpassing 50.0 cm in length. Some assemblages – such as that of Inenek Inti – were coloured in yellow and orange (ribs), respectively. The interior of the containers of Ankhnespepi II preserves traces after the offerings they originally accommodated. The food contents were probably mummified using resin and wrapping in linen, as remains of both materials were detected on the inner walls of some vessels. In contrast to them stand the perfectly clean vessels of Behenu and Meretites II.¹³

Stone food containers were also present in the burial chambers of other queens of King Pepi II at South Saqqara. Their pyramid complexes were excavated by Gustave Jéquier, who referred to the presence of stone food containers only within his general description of stone finds, without providing any accompanying drawings or photographs. In the case of Queen Neith, he reported the discovery of fragments of '*réceptifs symboliques, modelés suivant la forme de la pièce de viande ou de la volaille qu'ils doivent contenir*' [symbolic containers modelled as a piece of meat

13 Minault-Gout 2019, p. 151.

Tab. 2. List of evidence on stone food containers or their models from non-royal contexts.

Tomb	Site	Dynasty	Material	Size	Type	Bread/ cake	Poultry	Ribs	Haunch	Shoulder	Unidentified shape
Nakhtsare (AC 25)	Abusir	5	travertine	large-size	solid	1	4		2	1	1
Akhethotep	Saqqara	5	travertine	model	two-part	1					
Ptahshepses (AC 8)	Abusir	5	travertine	model	two-part						1 fragment
G 4733 E	Giza	6	travertine	model	solid	unclear	5	1	3	1	85 pieces (including a cow's leg and a pigeon?)
Qar Junior (AS 17)	Abusir	6	limestone	large-size	solid		5				
Inti-Peplankh (AS 22)	Abusir	6	limestone	large-size	two-part	2	5	1	3	1	
G 2385 A	Giza	6	limestone	large-size	two-part	4	9	2	8	2	
G 2381 Z	Giza	6	limestone	large-size	two-part	4	4	1	3	1	
South Saqqara	Saqqara	6	limestone	large-size	two-part			1			
Hena (?)	Saqqara	6	limestone	unknown	unknown		5	1			5 pieces of meat altogether
Washtptah	Saqqara	6	limestone	model	solid	1	2	1	2		

or poultry that it should contain].¹⁴ Some of these vessels were made of limestone, whilst others were crafted from travertine, the latter being of smaller dimensions. The description suggests that these objects were two-part containers rather than their solid imitations. Jéquier likewise recorded limestone food containers from the pyramid complex of Queen Wedjebten. According to his account, these were also discovered in fragmentary condition and encompassed all known types. This evidence further supports the interpretation that they were most likely produced as hollow, two-part containers.¹⁵

Food containers in non-royal contexts [Tab. 2]

Stone food containers and their model imitations also occur in non-royal burial contexts, i.e., members of the royal family and dignitaries. Even here, the earliest examples date to the Fifth Dynasty and are associated with individuals of high social standing and with strong connections to the royal family. One of the earliest known assemblages comes from the burial chamber of Nakhtsare, a supposed son of King Raneferef, who probably died prematurely. Nakhtsare's burial apartment contained a set of model food containers made of travertine.¹⁶ Unlike functional vessels, these objects are solid and lack internal cavities yet closely imitate the form and proportions of real containers. There were four ducks/geese (measuring 18.0–26.0 cm in length), one haunch (measuring 24.5 cm in length), one shoulder (measuring 27.0 cm in length) and two barely identifiable objects; one might be an oval loaf of bread measuring 11.8 cm in length, and the other perhaps a joint of meat measuring 27.0 cm in length. The last find (Find No. 35/AC25/1994) could be the end part of another haunch. Although being mere model pieces, their dimensions are comparable to those of the queens from Abusir. Despite their symbolic nature, the models maintained the visual and conceptual significance of the original vessels. Their presence in the burial chamber of Nakhtsare is due to his royal lineage. Moreover, his tomb held a prominent position in the cemetery, being situated immediately to the south of the pyramid complex of his father.

A rare example of a functional two-part stone food container from a non-royal context is associated with a high official Akhethotep at North Saqqara.¹⁷ This high dignitary was not of royal lineage, but he was associated with the royal family due to the marriage of his son Sankhuptah to a royal princess, Nubibnebtj.¹⁸

14 Jéquier 1933, pp. 32–33.

15 Jéquier 1928, p. 21.

16 Krejčí et al. 2008, pp. 55–60.

17 Ziegler 2007.

18 This relation is evidenced on two statues of Sankhuptah that are today stored in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo (CG, Cat. Nos. 37, 196, 201).

Akhethotep's looted burial chamber contained one piece of rather a model size travertine container for food offerings. Although previously interpreted as a bowl, its morphology – particularly the flat rim – strongly suggests identification as a part of a bread container. Its small size (6.6 cm in diameter, 2.1 cm in height) indicates that it may have functioned as a model rather than a full-scale vessel. There was probably more than one piece, as the publication refers to four other rim fragments of similar 'bowls' that were retrieved from the burial chamber.¹⁹

A fragment of a shallow travertine 'bowl' with a flat rim, a flat base, and short in height – supposedly a food container, was found in the area of the tomb of Ptahshepses in Abusir. It was discovered in the fill of the northern chapel of the initial mastaba.²⁰ Although its attribution to the vizier remains uncertain, the presence of such object would not be unexpected in his burial chamber. Ptahshepses is known to have married Princess Khamernernebt and thus also belonged to the elite.²¹

Further insight into non-royal usage is provided by the tomb G 4733 at Giza, where in the burial chamber of shaft E another assemblage was discovered.²² The tomb is usually dated to the latter part of the Fifth Dynasty. This assumption is based on a mud sealing bearing the Horus name of King Raneferef or Djedkare that was found inside the burial chamber.²³ However, the nature and morphology of the burial equipment consisting of pottery, stone vessels, copper model vessels etc. rather points to the dating of the burial to the early Sixth Dynasty. The assemblage from this context consists exclusively of small-scale model food containers – or maybe offerings – made of travertine. These objects are significantly smaller than typical containers and represent a broader range of forms, including both standard and less easily identifiable types.

Even more problematic is the assemblage of limestone model offerings attributed to the tomb of Rawer from Giza.²⁴ Although these objects are conventionally assigned to this tomb, which is dated to the reign of King Neferirkare or slightly later, the burial equipment of the tomb owner remains unknown,²⁵ as Hassan published only the contents of shafts located within and around Rawer's monument. In the case of shaft no. 39, he noted that 'in the debris of the shaft were found model loaves of bread in limestone',²⁶ and provided a photograph showing eight arranged pieces.²⁷ However, these objects differ from those listed in the corpus

19 Ziegler 2007, pp. 168–169.

20 Charvát 1981, p. 50.

21 Krejčí 2009, pp. 22–25.

22 *Digital Giza. The Project at Harvard University*, 2026, available at: <http://giza.fas.harvard.edu/sites/1123/full/>.

23 John Nolan defined three types of Old Kingdom seal impressions. The most common are those with the Horus name of a king, who reigned when the seal was made. But even Nolan admits that this dating may be tricky, Nolan 2018. For an older discussion on the dating of tombs based on clay sealings see Jánosi 2005, pp. 49–50.

24 *Digital Giza. The Project at Harvard University*, 2026, available at: <http://giza.fas.harvard.edu/sites/1935/full/>.

25 Hassan 1932, pp. 29–30.

26 Hassan 1932, p. 46.

27 Hassan 1932, Pl. LXXVII, no. 2.

available on the *Digital Giza. The Project at Harvard University* website, which includes a wider range of model offerings beyond simple bread loaves. Furthermore, when all items listed in the unpublished section of the *Catalogue général* (CG) are taken into account, the assemblage should comprise a total of fifty-five model offerings (CG, Cat. Nos. 1809–1863). Unfortunately, the catalogue does not provide precise information regarding their original context, apart from the note ‘*Im Sande unter einem halbzerstörten Pflaster Grundstein – Beigaben?*’ [In sand under a partly damaged paving stone – burial equipment?].²⁸ Shaft no. 39 itself was situated outside Rawer’s monument, to its east, and contained not only the model bread loaves but also a male skeleton with a necklace composed of tubular faience beads. This contextual evidence raises doubts as to whether the fifty-five model offerings can be securely associated with Rawer’s funerary complex. If these objects indeed originated from a burial chamber, they are more likely to belong to a Sixth Dynasty context. The assemblage includes not only traditional forms, such as bread loaves, ducks/geese, and haunches, but also a number of model bowls containing various types of fruits and seeds. All the model offerings exhibit traces of yellow or red paint, are made of limestone, and are relatively small in size, typically measuring between 4.5 and 8.0 cm in length or height. Some examples are hollowed at the base, a characteristic feature of Sixth Dynasty limestone models.



Fig. 2. Models of ducks/geese from the burial complex of the sons of vizier Qar at Abusir. (Photo: Kamil Voděra).

Assemblages of model food containers also appear in the Sixth Dynasty, now being made of limestone. These were discovered in South Abusir, in the burial complex of the sons of vizier Qar.²⁹ The courtyard of the complex housed openings of three shafts. One of them – labelled ‘B’ – led at its bottom to the burial chamber of Qar Junior (in the western direction), but also provided access to another burial

28 Pages of Ludwig Borchardt’s unpublished volume of *Catalogue général on ‘Foundation deposits, models and tools, Catalogue général 1809–2000’* where these offerings are listed is accessible on the website of Digital Giza with detailed information on individual finds from the tomb of Rawer, *Digital Giza. The Project at Harvard University*, 2026, available at: <http://giza.fas.harvard.edu/sites/1935/full/>.

29 Bárta et al. 2009.

chamber, which was labelled 'D' in the publication. This chamber is situated to the north of shaft B and could be accessed through a secondarily made opening in the shaft's north wall. This room yielded five limestone models of food containers in the form of trussed poultry painted to imitate real ducks or geese together with other parts of burial equipment [Fig. 2].³⁰ The assemblage varied in dimensions, the largest bird being 19.0 cm long, the smallest reaching only 10.5 cm in length.³¹ Each piece was painted yellow on its body, three ducks/geese had red beaks and two black beaks. They all also had black painted eyes. Their attribution to Qar Junior is highly probable, but not entirely certain. Nevertheless, a number of animal bones were discovered in the burial chamber of Qar Junior (burial chamber 'B'), including several duck and goose species, a teal, and a pigeon, as well as bones from a young ox.³²

A complete assemblage of large, full-size, two-part stone food containers originates from the burial chamber of another relative of vizier Qar, namely Inti-Pepiankh. Although his precise relationship to the vizier remains known, it is plausible that he was his grandson or great grandson. Vizier Qar had four sons, three of whom constructed their burials to the north-east of his mastaba. His fourth son, Inti, commissioned a large mastaba to the south of his father's. This structure incorporated several burial shafts within its masonry, most of which remain anonymous. However, the burial equipment discovered in the southernmost shaft revealed the name of its owner: Inti-Pepiankh, possibly a son or grandson of the judge Inti. The burial chamber of Inti-Pepiankh had likely been looted in antiquity; however, the robbers appear to have focused primarily on the body of the deceased, leaving the remaining burial equipment largely undisturbed in situ. Most offerings and various equipment were arranged to the east of the sarcophagus and remained intact until modern excavations.³³ Amongst them were discovered twelve large two-part food containers of five types, crafted from limestone and still preserving their original contents [Fig. 3].³⁴ The assemblage of Inti-Pepiankh is exceptional not only as a rare example of a complete set but also for another unique feature. It was found with actual animal remains preserved inside the containers.

Two of the containers were of the rounded form (one with a non-fitting oval lid) and likely once contained a loaf of bread or cake, now disintegrated. These were the smallest examples, each measuring 22.0 cm in diameter. The second largest category consists of five poultry-shaped containers, ranging from 21.5 cm to 35.0 cm in length. Zooarchaeological analysis conducted by Salima Ikram indicates that

30 According to the original field documentation, which is stored in the archive of the Czech Institute of Egyptology.

31 Bárta et al. 2009, pp. 225 (Find No. 61/AS17/2000), 235 (Find No. 65/AS17/2000), 237 (Find No. 67/AS17/2000), 238 (Find No. 68/AS17/2000), 240 (Find No. 74/AS17/2000). In the original documentation and earlier publications all the finds from the tomb complex of the sons of vizier Qar were labelled with the earlier tomb code 'HH'. It was later with the new code system of the Czech Institute of Egyptology changed into AS 17 (for shaft B).

32 Bárta et al. 2009, pp. 296–298.

33 Bárta 2002; Bárta 2006.

34 Bárta et al., *forth.*; Ikram 2006, pp. 167–173.



Fig. 3. Burial equipment of Inti-Pepiankh as it was found lying in front of the sarcophagus in his burial chamber at Abusir. (Photo: Miroslav Bárta).

two of these probably contained goose remains, one a duck, one a teal or a small goose, and the final possibly a pigeon or a dove.

The third category includes three haunch-shaped containers measuring between 33.0 and 48.0 cm in length. Two contained cattle femurs, whilst the third held a cattle humerus. Another container, shaped as a rack of ribs, measuring 37.5 cm in length, contained four cattle ribs. The fifth type represents a scapula-shaped container (44.5 cm long), within which a cattle scapula was discovered.

Comparable two-part limestone food containers, as well as fragments thereof, were identified in the sloping passage leading to the anonymous burial chamber G 2385 A at Giza.³⁵ George A. Reisner attributed this tomb to the vizier Khnumenti, who lived in the first half of the Sixth Dynasty. These containers, reportedly painted yellow both internally and externally, number at least twenty-six examples. The documented assemblage includes nine poultry-shaped containers (28.3–39.0 cm in length), four bread or cake forms (measuring 28.5–32.0 cm in length), two rib-shaped containers (measuring 34.0–57.0 cm in length), and eight haunch-shaped examples (measuring 55.0–56.0 cm in length). In addition, fragments of three shoulder-shaped objects were recorded, although it remains unclear whether these represent upper or lower parts. Most of these containers were found in a fragmentary state. The only reference to organic remnants is a note mentioning ‘four leg bones of an ox’ that were recovered from the lower chamber.³⁶ Thus,

35 Brovaski 2000, pp. 127–129.

36 *Digital Giza. The Project at Harvard University*, 2026, available at: <https://giza.fas.harvard.edu/unpubdocs/40752/full/>.

whilst it is highly probable that these containers originally held real meat, as in case of Inti-Pepiankh from Abusir, this cannot be definitively confirmed.

A closely comparable, though smaller, assemblage was discovered in pit G 2381 Z, also belonging to the burial complex of the Senedjemib family at Giza.³⁷ Reisner interpreted these finds as intrusive and suggested that they originally derived from another burial apartment, possibly G 2382 A, attributed to Nekhebu.³⁸ The assemblage comprises at least thirteen containers; four poultry forms (measuring 17.3–34.0 cm in length), four bread or cake sets (measuring 23.5–27.7 cm in diameter), one complete set for ribs (measuring 47.0 cm in length), one shoulder set (measuring 44.0 cm in length), and three haunch sets (measuring more than 46.5 cm in length). Edward Brovarski attempted to associate these stone containers with a deposit of animal bones discovered by Reisner also in the Senedjemib complex, but mistakenly Brovarski attributed both finds to the same shaft.³⁹ In fact, according to Reisner's records, the bones originated from the intact burial chamber of Ptahshepses Impy (G 2381 A, Find No. 12-12-574), whereas the stone food containers derive from the anonymous pit G 2381 Z.⁴⁰ Although it is likely that the stone food containers from G 2381 Z originally held actual meat and bread offerings, this is not directly attested in the archaeological record.

Additional Sixth Dynasty assemblages of model stone food containers were identified in South Saqqara, in the cemeteries near the pyramid of King Pepi II. However, Jéquier recorded these finds only briefly, without providing detailed descriptions, illustrations, or photographs. One example, discovered west of the enclosure wall of Queen Neith, is described as a limestone rib-shaped container approximately 29.0 cm long.⁴¹ Two further assemblages were reportedly recovered from the tomb of Hena (?) and Washptah. The former is said to have contained a variety of container models, whilst the latter comprised four meat models.⁴² Some of these objects are listed in the unpublished *Catalogue général*. However, the entries are often limited to vague descriptions such as 'an offering' and the accompanying photographs are too small for secure identification.⁴³ Nevertheless, based on the available data, the tomb of Washptah appears to have contained six limestone containers; two poultry forms (one measuring 19.0 cm in length [Acc. No. JdE⁴⁴ 49812], the other one 24.0 cm [Acc. No. JdE 49813]), a one rounded bread container

37 *Digital Giza. The Project at Harvard University*, 2026, available at: <http://giza.fas.harvard.edu/sites/831/full/>.

38 *Digital Giza. The Project at Harvard University*, 2026, available at: <http://giza.fas.harvard.edu/sites/832/full/>.

39 Brovarski 2000, p. 129.

40 For details see *Digital Giza. The Project at Harvard University*, 2026, available at: <http://giza.fas.harvard.edu/sites/831/full/>.

41 Jéquier 1933, p. 49.

42 Jéquier 1929, pp. 28–29.

43 Some pages from Ludwig Borchardt's unpublished volume on 'Foundation deposits, models and tools, *Catalogue général 1809–2000*' are available with the details on the stone container finds from the tombs G 2385 A and G 2381 Z, including also several finds of the same nature coming from other Old Kingdom tombs, at *Digital Giza. The Project at Harvard University*, 2026, available at: <http://giza.fas.harvard.edu>.

44 = *Journal d'Entrée*.

(20.0 cm in diameter [Acc. No. JdE 49809]), one rib-shaped piece (33.0 cm in length [Acc. No. JdE 49808]), and two haunch or shoulder forms (measuring 23.0 and 20.0 cm in length [Acc. Nos. JdE 49810–49811]). All these models were painted, with poultry rendered in yellow and meat joints in red. The partial list of finds coming from the tomb of Hena includes a duck or goose model (painted yellow, 20.0 cm long [Acc. No. JdE 49816]) and a piece of ribs (painted red, 28.0 cm long [Acc. No. JdE 49817]), both in limestone. Reisner, however, refers more generally to a set of ten models, comprising five birds painted yellow and five meat pieces painted red.⁴⁵

Salima Ikram has compiled a corpus of stone food containers identified in various museum collections. Most of them originate from the Senedjemib complex at Giza, while others lack precise provenance.⁴⁶

In addition to stone examples, a unique copper food container in the shape of a rounded loaf (10.3 cm in diameter), still containing barley bread, was discovered in burial chamber G 7143 B at Giza.⁴⁷ No comparable examples in copper or other materials are currently known.

Conclusions and interpretation

The evidence presented in this study demonstrates that stone food containers constitute a rare and highly specific category of Old Kingdom burial equipment. To date, only approximately twenty-one assemblages have been identified in published or partially published form. These are primarily concentrated at sites such as Abusir and Saqqara, with a smaller number known from Giza, and belong predominantly to the Fifth and Sixth Dynasties.

The material associated with Queen Khentkaus II from Abusir currently represents the earliest securely attested example of this class of objects. The available data suggest a distinct pattern of distribution. Initially, large two-part stone food containers appear to have been produced exclusively for the kings and queens. Their gradual appearance in non-royal contexts during the latter part of the Fifth Dynasty and especially in the Sixth Dynasty reflects a broader diffusion of elite funerary practices. Material selection further reflects social differentiation. Travertine containers are predominantly associated with royal burials and high-status individuals, whereas limestone examples are more common in non-royal contexts,

45 *Digital Giza. The Project at Harvard University*, 2026, available at: <http://giza.fas.harvard.edu/unpubdocs/41446/full/>.

46 Ikram 1995, pp. 231–235.

47 Museum of Fine Arts Boston, 2026, available at: <https://collections.mfa.org/objects/141552/circular-food-case?ctx=0d64b4f6-b95b-4309-ba29-c9d435810f40&idx=39>.

particularly in the later Old Kingdom. However, by the later Sixth Dynasty, even royal assemblages increasingly relied on limestone.

In terms of size and craftsmanship, the containers of Khentkaus II rank amongst the largest known examples from the Fifth Dynasty, while Sixth Dynasty assemblages tend to include significantly larger and more numerous vessels overall.

The only examples of the travertine two-part food containers that derived from the burial chambers of high dignitaries of non-royal origin belonged to Akhethotep and, maybe, Ptahshepses. These two individuals were members of the elite of the latter part of the Fifth Dynasty and therefore the presence of such an exclusive part of the burial equipment in their tombs is not surprising.

All the limestone two-part food containers discovered in non-royal contexts were recovered from the Sixth Dynasty burial chambers, probably middle to late. Nevertheless, only three assemblages have been identified and published; one at Abusir, and the other two at Giza. Containers from G 2381 Z and Inti-Pepiankh's burial chamber had similar dimensions; those from G 2385 A were slightly larger. Furthermore, the assemblage from G 2385 A is the most numerous, counting twenty-six sets at the minimum.

Two principal categories can be distinguished: functional two-part containers, hollowed to accommodate actual offerings, and solid model imitations. The four so far identified examples of imitations of real containers show high degree of variability. Moreover, none of them was attested in a royal context and they were mostly discovered in the elite burial chambers. Of the highest value is in this respect the assemblage of Nakhtsare, the supposed son of King Raneferef. His models of stone offering containers had large dimensions and were made of travertine. The other travertine set derives from the burial chamber of G 4733 E, but in comparison to Nakhtsare, these were much smaller. The latter two published examples were all made of limestone and painted to imitate the real offerings, both coming from the Sixth Dynasty contexts, from Abusir and South Saqqara.

It is noteworthy that, from their emergence onwards, the range of types remained unchanged throughout the Old Kingdom. The assemblages documented thus far consistently comprise bread loaves or cakes (either rounded or oval), poultry (presumably ducks or geese, though bones of teals or pigeons have also been identified within), and cuts of meat, invariably represented by a haunch, a shoulder, and a portion of ribs (typically four ribs within a single vessel). The limestone models and containers were frequently painted. In this respect, containers associated with bread and poultry were generally coated in yellow pigment, whereas those representing meat were rendered in reddish tones.

With regard to the number of individual container types within the preserved assemblages, no strict standard appears to have governed their quantity. All assemblages have been recovered in a fragmented state, with the notable exception of that of Inti-Pepiankh at Abusir. Salima Ikram, who examined the contents of

Inti-Pepiankh's stone food containers attempted to correlate them with the offering list and the enumerated offerings. She concluded that, despite some variation in offering lists, they typically include five portions of meat and five types of poultry, whilst the number of bread loaves is more variable.⁴⁸ The offering list of Debeheni, regarded by Winfried Barta as a model for Fifth Dynasty offering lists, as well as those from the Sixth Dynasty, comprise all elements necessary for the full performance of the offering ritual. The central section of these lists records the funerary repast, during which a variety of food and drink was presented to the deceased. Included in this meal were indeed five distinct types of poultry. However, in both Lists A and A/B from the later Old Kingdom, more than five cuts of meat are attested. The funerary repast appears to have included at least ten distinct varieties of meat. Amongst these are one portion of ribs (*spr*), one leg (*hps*) and two rumps (*swt* and *iw*). The fifth item – *zhp* – might be the shoulder. The other five kinds of meat are denoted solely by the determinative for flesh and may also include some internal organs. Although numerous references to bread occur within the offering lists, two specific types of loaves of bread – one rounded and one conical – are mentioned following the enumeration of poultry.⁴⁹

When considering the number of individual containers, several assemblages include five examples of poultry. Such cases have been documented in the burial chamber of Inti-Pepiankh, in the tomb of Qar Jr. at Abusir, the tomb of Hena at Saqqara, and the burial chambers of Queens Ankhnespepi II and Meretites II. By contrast, tomb G 2385 A yielded fragments of at least nine poultry-shaped containers. The number of bread or cake containers is relatively consistent, typically ranging from one to two per assemblage. Exceptions again occur in G 2385 A and G 2381 Z, where at least four such containers were identified. The number of meat containers generally ranges between four and five, which does not fully correspond to the quantities indicated in the offering lists. Typically, assemblages include one or two portions of ribs and shoulders, alongside two or three haunches. In the largest assemblage, from G 2385 A, twelve meat containers were preserved. Notably, in the offering lists, when ribs – *spr* – are mentioned, they are specified in a quantity of four, indicating that a portion of ribs consisted of four pieces. This is corroborated by the container from the burial chamber of Inti-Pepiankh, which indeed contained four cattle ribs.

The available evidence for stone food containers and their model imitations remains limited and consequently allows only preliminary observations regarding patterns of production and distribution. It is, however, evident that two materials were employed to produce two categories of objects; functional containers and their model counterparts. These were crafted from travertine and reserved for

48 Ikram 2006, p. 171.

49 Barta 1963, pp. 72, 82–88, Abb. 4–5.

members of the royal family and the highest-ranking officials during the Fifth Dynasty. In the Sixth Dynasty, production expanded to include limestone, accompanied by an increase in both the size and number of individual pieces. Despite some variations, most containers were shaped as stone representations of bread or cake loaves, rib portions, haunches, shoulders, or various types of poultry. It is highly probable that these containers originally held the corresponding food items.

In the light of the newly identified objects associated with Queen Khentkaus II from Abusir, further excavations, as well as the study of unpublished materials, hold significant potential for uncovering new evidence and thereby enhancing our understanding of this distinctive category of non-perishable funerary equipment.

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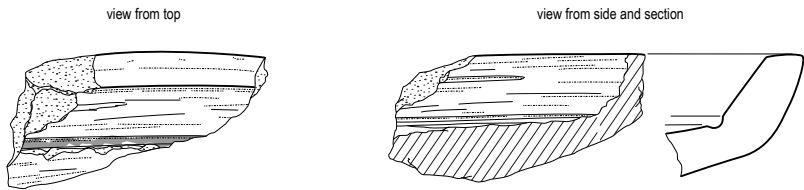


Pl. 1. Stone food containers of Khentkaus II kept in the Náprstek Museum in Prague, inner sides of vessels. (Photo: Jiří Vaněk).

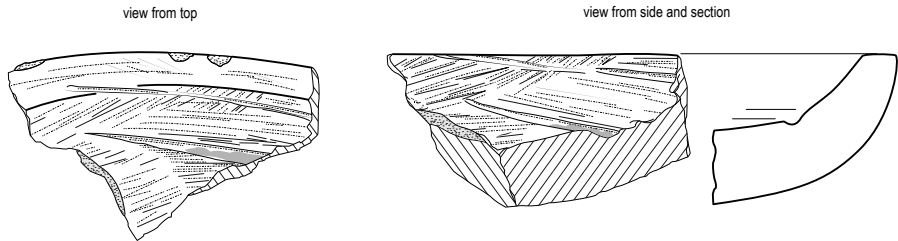


Pl. 2. Stone food containers of Khentkaus II kept in the Náprstek Museum in Prague, outer walls of vessels. (Photo: Jiří Vaněk).

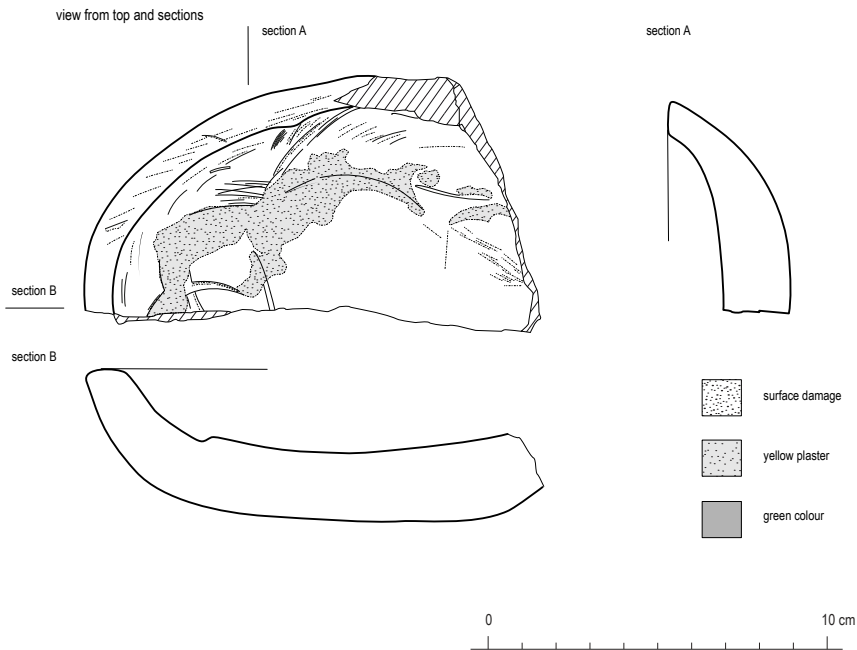
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9a/AC14/1980

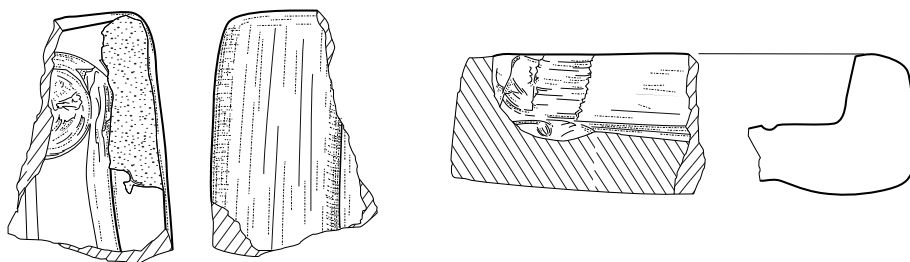


Pl. 3. Line drawings of the stone food containers of Khentkaus II kept in the Náprstek Museum in Prague, the first part. (Drawing: Lucie Jirásková; Digitalisation: Lucie Vařeková).

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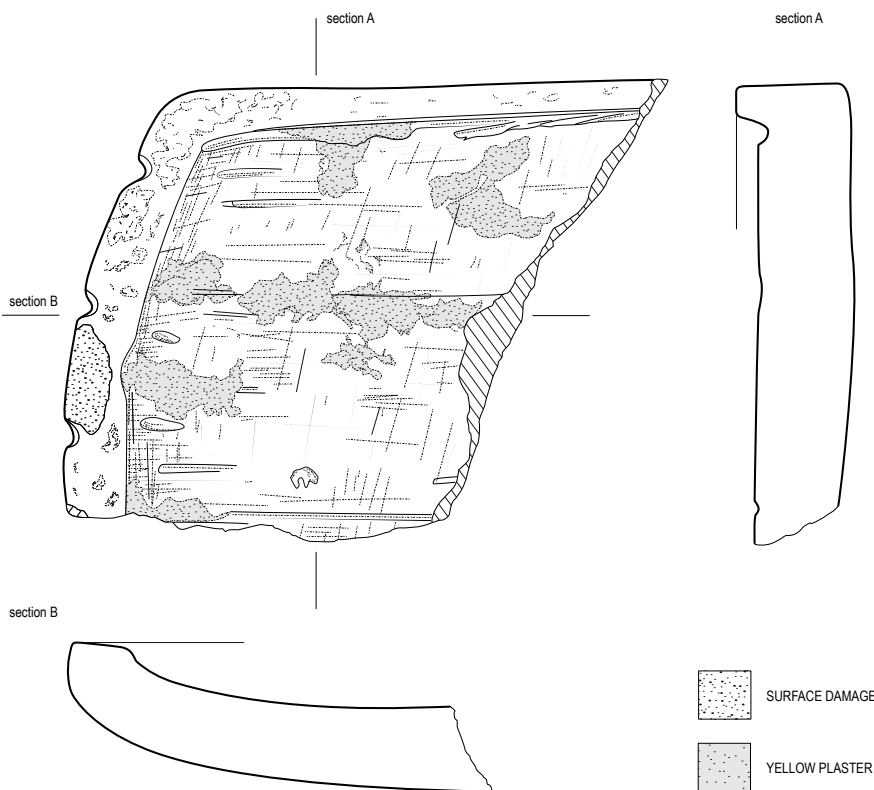
view from top and base

view from side and section



12/AC14/1980

view from top and sections



Pl. 4. Line drawings of the stone food containers of Khentkaus II kept in the Náprstek Museum in Prague, the second part. (Drawing: Lucie Jirásková; Digitalisation: Lucie Vařeková).

