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Egyptian Middle Kingdom Oyster Shells with Royal Names Function, Chronology and Gender Issues

AHMED M. MEKAWY OUDA*

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article examine les questions de la fonction, de la chronologie et du genre des coquilles du Moyen Empire, en prenant comme point de départ l'exemple MMA 23.2.76a. En s'appuyant sur une recherche détaillée de ce type d'objets, il présente une analyse critique des publications discutant de leur fonction et du genre de leur propriétaire. Le but de cet article est en outre d'explorer le contexte archéologique dans lequel ces coquilles ont été mises au jour, en mettant le matériel inédit de Sheikh Farag en relation avec les exemples publiés de Licht et d'Esna. Cette étude montre le rapport que ces coquilles entretenaient avec d'autres types d'objets de la fin du Moyen Empire, tels que des ouchebtis ou des ivoires magiques, et l'absence de lien avec les modèles de bois typiques du début du Moyen Empire.

Mots-clés : coquille d'huître, perle, lin, bandelettes de momie, pigment, poignard, protège-poignet, Sésostri I^{er}/Kheperkarê, Amenemhat II, Sésostri III, Toutânkhamon, mer Rouge, Gébelein, Qoubbet el-Hawa, Assouan, Licht, Sheikh Farag, Esna, MMA 23.2.76a.

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the function, chronology, and gender issues of the Egyptian Middle Kingdom oyster shells, taking MMA 23.2.76a as a case-study. It presents a critical analysis for the early publication on the function and the gender of the owner, of this oyster shell and many others, based on a close investigation of this object. Furthermore, it investigates the archaeological context in which these oyster shells were found, presenting some unpublished materials from Sheikh Farag, collaborating with the published material from Lisht and Esna. It shows the relationships the oyster shells entertain with other objects of Late Middle Kingdom, e.g. shabtis and ivory tusks, and the absence of the wooden models, typical early Middle Kingdom objects.

Keywords: oyster shell, pearl, linen, mummy-wrappings, pigment, dagger, wrist guard, Senwosret I/Kheperkara, Amenemhat II, Senwosret III, Tutankhamun, Red Sea, Gebelein, Qubbet el-Hawa Aswan, Lisht, Sheikh Farag, Esna, MMA 23.2.76a.



THIS PAPER presents new evidence for the function and chronology of Middle Kingdom oyster shells, and the gender of their owners, taking the inscribed oyster shell of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (MMA 23.2.76a), as a case-study. It offers a critical analysis of the early publication of this oyster shell and further discusses the function, date, and gender of the owner.

The study of the function, date, and the gender of the owner of these Middle Kingdom oyster shells was initiated by Herbert E. Winlock, focusing mainly on the oyster shell of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (MMA 23.2.76a), with another twenty-eight oyster shells.¹ This shell, measuring 10 × 10 cm, has a highly polished surface and is well-preserved, although it is chipped and broken at the top and at the right side (fig. 1). Two holes were pierced at the hinge of the shell for suspension. A vertical cartouche of the throne name, Kheperkara, of King Senwosret I, is incised almost at the centre of the convex outer surface of the shell. The ancient Egyptian artist measured the centre from the right and the left side disregarding the distance from top and bottom of the shell which is not equal. The cartouche looks like an authentic contemporary carving with well-cut hieroglyphs. The loop of the cartouche has four vertical strokes,² and the *ka*-sign with clenched fists has two upright strokes in the middle of the horizontal bar.³ This feature is

¹ H.E. WINLOCK, "Pearl shells of Sen-Wosret I", *Studies presented to F. Ll. Griffith*, London, 1932, pp. 387–392.

² This feature is also attested for the following oyster shells, bearing the birth or throne name of Senwosret/Kheperkara: CG 12825, CG 12828/JdE 31261: CG 12829 (G.A. REISNER, *Amulets II* [CG 12528-13595], Cairo, 1958, pp. 38–39, pls. 10, 25), JdE 36398 (see below, especially footnotes 25–26), ABDUA 21121 (PM V, p. 108; R.W. REID, *Illustrated Catalogue of the Anthropological Museum*, Aberdeen, 1912, p. 159 [1087]), Ashmolean Museum 1892.1132, BM EA20754, BM EA29434, BM EA30056, BM EA30057, MFA Boston 13.3532 (see below), Art Gallery Birmingham 1969W4706, Eton College Myers Museum 1844-2010 (N. REEVES, S. QUIRKE, S. SPURR, *Egyptian Art at Eton College: Selections from the Myers Museum*, New York, 1999, p. 15 [6]), Fitzwilliam Museum E.203.1900 (J. BOURRIAU, *Pharaohs and Mortals. Egyptian Art in the Middle Kingdom*, Cambridge, 1988, p. 153 [c]), UC16117-16118, UC52151-52, Yale University of Art Gallery 1937.186 (G.D. SCOTT, *Ancient Egyptian art at Yale*, New Haven, 1986, pp. 70–71, [36 A]).

³ J. BOURRIAU, op. cit., p. 154.

attested in many other shells bearing the throne name of Kheperkara.⁴ The back (inside) of the shell has visible fragments of linen adhering to a dark brown staining along the edges of the shell, as well as the imprint of linen on the internal surface staining. The scrapes on the concave surface, and the damage at the top and the right side of this oyster shell, may be attributed to use-wear. It shows marine erosion on its surface represented in little small holes resulting from sand worms, as the source of this shell, like other Egyptian pearl-oyster, *Avicula (Meleagrina) margaritacea*, was undoubtedly the Red Sea.⁵ From the artificial and natural marks on this shell and many others, the chaîne opératoire of the work of mother-of-pearls can be deduced in the following stages:⁶

1. Selection of the raw material;
2. Cutting by separating the two valves;
3. Shaping by removing totally the limestone periostracum to expose the mother-of-pearl coating, and polishing the edges and surface of the valve, taking a circular shape;
4. Piercing the holes at the hinge;
5. Incising the cartouche containing the royal name;
6. Filling the signs and the frame of the cartouche with blue pigment.

This oyster shell is said to be from Gebelein.⁷ It was purchased in Luxor from Sayed Melettam in 1923 by H.E. Winlock who wrote:

In 1923 Sayed Melettam, who was then an antiquity dealer in a small way around Luxor, brought me a pearl shell inscribed with the prenomen of Senwosret I and a curious tag of blackish leather. He said that they had been found together on the arm of a mummy unearthed at Gebelein, and it seemed obvious that they did belong together, judging from a stain on the shell, unmistakably made by the tag.⁸

This quotation points to two persons, Sayed Melettam, the Luxor antiquity dealer in the early Twentieth Century,⁹ and Kheperkara, the throne name of King Senwosret I, the second

⁴ Cf. UC52I52-53, UC16II7-18, MMA 22.1.63 (S. QUIRKE, *Birth Tusks: The Armoury of Health in Context-Egypt 1800 BC*, London, 2016, p. 94), MMA 61.104, BM EA20754, BM EA65268, JdE 28320 (see below footnote 26), Fitzwilliam Museum E.270.1932 (J. BOURRIAU, op. cit., p. 153 [b]), Egyptian Museum Turin 14130 (E. D'AMICONE, "Cowrie-Shells and Pearl-oysters: Two Iconographic Repertoires of Middle Kingdom Gold-work", *BSEG* 9-10, 1984, p. 64 [figs. 1-2]–65, n. 2), AIC 1894.695 (T.G. ALLEN, *Handbook of the Egyptian Collection*, Chicago, 1923, p. 126), National Museums Liverpool, World Museum 1977.110.1 (D. DOWNES, *The Excavations at Esna 1905-1906*, Warminster, 1976, p. 59 [263], fig. 30), private collection Paris (J.-P. CORTEGGIANI, "Documents divers (I-VI)", *BIFAO* 73, 1973, pp. 144-146, pl. 8 [A]).

⁵ A. LUCAS, J.R. HARRIS, *Ancient Egyptian materials and industries*, London, 1962, p. 38; C. ALDRED, "A pearl Shell Disk of Ammenemes II", *JEA* 38, 1952, p. 131; H.E. WINLOCK, op. cit., p. 389, n. 1; J.-P. CORTEGGIANI, op. cit., p. 144, n. 5; J. BOURRIAU, op. cit., p. 154.

⁶ For the expression "chaîne opératoire" and a comparative example from a different culture see: L. BERTIN, "Exploitation of mother of pearl in the Middle Ages, Clos d'Ugnac archaeological site (Pennautier, Aude, France): Malacological study, consumption, exploitation and utilization of the nacre", *Quaternary International* 375, 2015, pp. 149, 151. These stages are not listed in one-study, but they are scattered: G. MASPERO, *Guide du visiteur au Musée du Caire*, Cairo, 1915, p. 524; J. BOURRIAU, op. cit., pp. 153-154; H.E. WINLOCK, loc. cit.; C. ALDRED, loc. cit.

⁷ H.E. WINLOCK, op. cit., p. 387; PM V, p. 164.

⁸ H.E. WINLOCK, loc. cit.

⁹ Sayed Melettam sold many objects to the Metropolitan Museum of Fine Art New York from 1917-1936 (e.g. 20.2.13a-c, 23.2.76b, 20.2.16, 17.2.7a.1-2, 24.2.19, 22.2.32a, b, 20.2.19, 20.2.14e, 36.2.3, 18.2.10, 20.2.15b, 36.2.4, 22.2.26).

king of the Twelfth Dynasty (1956-1911 BC). It specifies two objects, an oyster shell and a tag (MMA 23.2.76b), which was designed to protect the wrist of the archers from the rebound of the bowstring and the end of the arrow as it was released,¹⁰ and a location, i.e. Gebelein.

These objects were obtained by illicit excavations,¹¹ although this statement is worth further examination. As for the provenance of these two objects, Sayed Melettam could be right, especially since another oyster shell was found at Gebelein in the excavations of E. Schiaparelli (1856-1928) in 1911, though this excavation has not been published apart from a report.¹² It is kept at the Egyptian Museum Turin S. 14130 (10 x 10 cms). The throne name, Kheperkara, is incised on the surface (fig. 2).¹³ The hieroglyphic signs are well-cut, and the *ka*-sign with clenched fists has the same two upright strokes in the middle of the horizontal bar, though the colour of the surface of the shell looks different.

The story that the MMA oyster shell and the protective tag were found together on the arm of a mummy is not plausible. The dark stain on the inside of the shell is on the top and at the bottom, which indicates that it was not made by the tag.¹⁴ The rest of the dark stain was probably removed intentionally by a sharp tool, as the centre of the back shows many scrapes. It could have been removed by the tomb robbers, or by Sayed Melettam. The same dark stain partially covers the top of the outer surface of the shell, above the two suspension holes. The hieroglyphic signs inside the cartouche, and the frame of the cartouche itself have dark stains (although this may be blue pigment which has darkened).¹⁵ The inside of the shell has fragments of linen at the top-left and linen imprints cover much of the rest of the inside surface.¹⁶ This suggests that this oyster shell was resting on the body i.e. on the chest of the mummy (see below), and the dark stain probably was made by the dark colour of the balms of non-bituminous sources of the mummy wrappings rather than by the tag.¹⁷ Based on the finding of another oyster shell on the chest of a mummy at Aswan, H.E. Winlock assumed that this oyster shell was placed on the arm by mistake, comparing it to the mummy of Tutankhamun, where many objects were dislocated on the mummy by the ancient Egyptians.¹⁸ The only interpretation for this issue is that this oyster shell was taken away from its original location, i.e. the chest, by the thieves and tomb robbers, if Sayed Melettam did not mix two different objects from two different burials.

¹⁰ W.C. HAYES, *Scepter of Egypt I: A Background for the Study of the Egyptian Antiquities in The Metropolitan Museum of Art: From the Earliest Times to the End of the Middle Kingdom*, Cambridge, 1953, p. 281, fig. 184; A.F. SHORE, "A Soldier's Archery Case from Ancient Egypt", *The British Museum Quarterly* 37/1-2, 1973, p. 5; J.C. DARNELL, C. MANASSA, *Tutankhamun's Armies: Battle and Conquest During Ancient Egypt's Late Eighteenth Dynasty*, Hoboken, 2007, p. 73.

¹¹ J. BOURRIAU, op. cit., p. 154.

¹² E. SCHIAPARELLI, "La Missione italiana a Ghebelein", *ASAE* 21, 1921, pp. 126-128; cf. PM V, pp. 162-164.

¹³ E. D'AMICONE, loc. cit.

¹⁴ <http://metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/556016> (accessed June 2019). The dimension of the tag is smaller than the oyster shell to make these stains (cf. MMA 27.3.135 [6x5.5 cm]).

¹⁵ Cf. Louvre Museum E 32662 and E 14261 (F. SERVAJEAN, "La conquête de l'espace [section B]", in L.B. Rizzo, A. Gasse, F. Servajean (eds.), *À l'école des scribes. Les écritures de l'Égypte ancienne*, CENiM 15, 2016, p. 128-129), BM EA65268, National Museums Scotland Edinburgh A.1951.322 (C. ALDRED op. cit., pp. 130-132).

¹⁶ CG 12825/JdE 30381 had "traces of mummy cloth clinging to outside": G.A. REISNER, op. cit., p. 38 [12825], pl. 10. It also has a big dark stain inside the shell and linen imprints which cover much of the rest of the inside surface.

¹⁷ Cf. K.A. CLARK, S. IKRAM, R.P. EVERSLED, "The significance of petroleum bitumen in ancient Egyptian mummies", *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* 374/2079, 2016, p. 2.

¹⁸ H.E. WINLOCK, op. cit., p. 389.

H.E. Winlock suggested that the owner of this oyster shell was an archer,¹⁹ as an archer's tag (MMA 23.2.76b) was found on the arm of this mummy, protecting his wrist,²⁰ though the gender of the mummy was not specified by Sayed Melettam²¹ and Egyptian burial equipment not necessarily indicated the owner's profession.²² Winlock proposed a function for this oyster shell, and the many others which are kept in different museums:²³

Had they had an ordinary religious or amuletic value in the usual senses of the words, we should expect no such brief vogue. They seem, on the contrary, to have been a badge rigorously limited to one short period-and that period to all intents and purposes the reign of Senwosret I-and from this circumstance I should suppose they had a secular rather than an amuletic purpose... Here we have the insignia of some military organization or class, raised by Senwosret I and allowed to become extinct soon after his death.²⁴

This point of view is based on finding another oyster shell (JdE 36398) on the breast of a mummy found with a dagger on the thigh at Qubbet el-Hawa. It is currently kept at the Nubian Museum (fig. 3) without an inventory number. It was found in front of the entrance to one of the rock-hewn tombs on the north eastern slope of the Gebel Qubbet el-Hawa, just above the ruined Coptic convent of St George, at Aswan. Lady William Cecil describes the discovery as follows:²⁵

We began work on this part of the hill on Feb 13th 1902. We found, near what appeared to be the entrance to a tomb, the dilapidated remains of a mummy. What was left of the wrappings was very fine. On the breast of the mummy we found a mother-of-pearl shell

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 390.

²⁰ <http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/556018> (accessed June 2017).

²¹ Cf. U. DUBIEL, *Amulette, Siegel und Perlen: Studien zu Typologie und Tragesitte im Alten und Mittleren Reich*, OBO 292, 2008, p. 155.

²² S.J. SEIDLMAYER, "People at Beni Hassan: Contributions to a Model of Ancient Egyptian Rural Society", in Z.A. Hawass, J. Richards (eds.), *The Archaeology and Art of Ancient Egypt, Essays in Honor of David B. O'Connor*, CASAE 36/2, 2007, p. 354; W. GRAJETZKI, *Tomb Treasures of the Late Middle Kingdom*, Philadelphia, 2014, pp. 12–13.

²³ I have counted 56 oyster shells which are scattered in over 26 museums, private collection and art gallery (cf. G.D. SCOTT, op. cit., p. 71; J. BOURRIAU, loc. cit.).

²⁴ H.E. WINLOCK, op. cit., pp. 390–391. Aldred published an oyster shell for King Amenemhat II/Nubkaure (National Museums Scotland Edinburgh A.1951.322; cf. BM EA364499): C. ALDRED, loc. cit.; Arkell presented an oyster shell with the name of Senwosret III/Khakaure: A.J. ARKELL, "A Mother-of-Pearl Shell Disk of Sen-wosret III", *JEA* 30, 1944, p. 74; D. DUNHAM, *Uronarti, Shalfak, Mirgissa: Excavated by George Andrew Reisner and Noel F. Wheeler*, Boston, 1967, p. 48, [278], pl. xliii b [28-12278]; G.A. REISNER, "Uronarti", *Sudan Notes and Records* 14/1, 1931, p. 5; PM VII, p. 144; J.-P. CORTEGGIANI, op. cit., p. 145, n. 3. A second oyster shell with the name of Senwosret III/Khakaure was found at Byblos and should be added to this list: M. DUNAND, *Fouilles de Byblos 1933-1938* II, Paris, 1954, p. 105, pl. CXLV.

²⁵ L.W. CECIL, "Report on the Work Done at Aswan", *ASAE* 4, 1903, p. 68. According to the study of H. Willems (*The Coffin of Heqata [Cairo JdE 36418]: A Case Study of Egyptian Funerary Culture of the Early Middle Kingdom*, OLA 70, 1996, p. 21ff), this tomb should be no. 20 where the burial of Heqata was found, though the report did not specify or give a number for the tomb or the entrance before which the objects were found. The distance between the entrance, where the oyster shell and other objects were found, and the tomb was not specified (S. QUIRKE, op. cit., p. 93).

inscribed with the throne name of Usertesen I,²⁶ which was retained by the Service. Among the wrappings on the thigh we found a bronze dagger and in other places among the folds a string of red agate beads and a string of large greenish porcelain beads; close by we also found a curved piece of bone about 8 inches long,²⁷ engraved with the figures of gods and animals, Bes, Anubis, Ta-urt and Bast, a lion and a gazelle, etc.

The point of view of Winlock, that the oyster shells were military badges of soldiers, was rejected by many scholars.²⁸ However, some researchers followed his opinion since then without examining his method or reasoning.²⁹ He built his point of view on one object, a dagger. This object does not necessarily indicate a male soldier or an archer. Daggers have religious and ritualistic meanings which remain obscure.³⁰ They were attested in royal and non-royal male and female burials and on the coffin friezes of the Middle Kingdom.³¹ For example, they are attested in “the court type burials” of women,³² Senebtisi,³³ Ita,³⁴ Khenmet,³⁵ Nubhetepi-khered,³⁶ and Iamyt,³⁷ of the late Middle Kingdom.

26 This oyster shell has the birth name of the King Senwosret I, not the throne name (JdE 36398, currently Nubian Museum Aswan). H. Winlock (op. cit., p. 391 [I], pl. 62 [a]) included this inventory number with an incorrect image for an oyster shell with the throne name Kheperkara (= JdE 28320, purchased at Qift). Willems and others copied from him, giving the reference of Winlock for an oyster shell with the name of Kheperkara: H. WILLEMS, op. cit., p. 18, n. 15; S. QUIRKE, op. cit., p. 94.

27 It is an ivory-tusk: S. QUIRKE, op. cit., p. 93; PM V, p. 24; F. LEGGE, “The Magic Ivories of the Middle Empire”, *PSBA* 27, p. 145, pl. xiv [fig. 23]: The magic wands are used to protect the newborn children and mothers and placed over their bodies. They were kept in the tombs to help the deceased in having a divine birth in the afterlife: J. ROBERSON, “the Early History of ‘New Kingdom’ Netherworld Iconography: A Late Middle Kingdom Apotropaic Wand Reconsidered”, in D.P. Silverman, W.K. Simpson, J. Wegner (eds.), *Archaism and Innovations: Studies in the Culture of Middle Kingdom Egypt*, New Haven, 2009, p. 436; cf. J. WEGNER, “Decorated Birth-Brick from South Abydos”, in D.P. Silverman, W.K. Simpson, J. Wegner (eds.), *Archaism and innovations: Studies in the Culture of Middle Kingdom Egypt*, New Haven, 2009, pp. 452–455, figs. 6, 10.

28 J. BOURRIAU, loc. cit.; U. DUBIEL, op. cit., pp. 156–157; S. QUIRKE, op. cit., p. 94; C. ALDRED, op. cit., p. 132; N. REEVES, S. QUIRKE, S. SPURR, loc. cit.

29 C. ANDREWS, *Ancient Egyptian Jewellery*, London, 1990, p. 65; C. ANDREWS, *Catalogue of Egyptian Antiquities, Jewellery I*, VI, London, 1981, p. 63; K. BUTTERWECK-ABDELRAHIM, *Untersuchungen zur Ehrung verdienter Beamter*, *AegMonast* 3, 2002, p. 51; A. WILKINSON, *Ancient Egyptian Jewellery*, London, 1971, p. 60; D.B. O’CONNOR, “An expanding Worldview Conquest, Colonization, and Coexistence”, in A. Oppenheim, D. Arnold, D. Arnold, K. Yamamoto (eds.), *Ancient Egypt transformed: The Middle Kingdom*, New Haven, 2015, p. 169 [102A].

30 U. DUBIEL, op. cit., p. 156; W. GRAJETZKI, op. cit., p. 30. The representation of the weaponry, staves, and sceptres on a large number of the coffin friezes of the Middle Kingdom shows that they are related to the object offering ritual: H. WILLEMS, *Chests of Life: A Study of the Typology and Conceptual Development of Middle Kingdom Standard Class Coffins*, Leiden, 1988, p. 204 (fig. 24), p. 226.

31 S. PETSCHER, *Den Dolch betreffend: Typologie der Stichwaffen in Ägypten von der prädynastischen Zeit bis zur 3. Zwischenzeit*, *Philippika: Marburger altertumskundliche Abhandlungen* 36, 2011, pp. 38, 65, 67–92; S. QUIRKE, loc. cit.

32 W. GRAJETZKI, op. cit., p. 29; S. QUIRKE, loc. cit.

33 H.E. WINLOCK, A.C. MACE, *The tomb of Senebtisi at Lisht*, New York, 1916, p. 60, pl. 32 a-c; W. GRAJETZKI, loc. cit.; S. QUIRKE, loc. cit.; U. DUBIEL, loc. cit.

34 J. DE MORGAN, *Fouilles à Dahchour en 1894-1895*, II, Vienna, 1903, pp. 48, 51–53, pl. 6; W. GRAJETZKI, op. cit., pp. 51–52, fig. 42. Most probably that she was buried in the reign of Amenemhat III, almost thirty years after the death of Amenemhat II: W. GRAJETZKI, op. cit., p. 54.

35 J. DE MORGAN, op. cit., p. 55; W. GRAJETZKI, loc. cit.

36 J. DE MORGAN, *Fouilles à Dahchour*, I, Vienna, 1895, pp. 109, 113, figs. 253–255, 267; W. GRAJETZKI, op. cit., p. 78, fig. 63.

37 W. GRAJETZKI, *Harageh: An Egyptian Burial Ground for the Rich, Around 1800 BC*, London, 2004, pp. 23–24.

Another oyster shell was found with flint-tipped arrows in a Middle Kingdom tomb no. 22 at Qubbet el-Hawa.³⁸ It is difficult to specify the current location for the tomb or the oyster shell according to the report of Lady W. Cecil:³⁹

Within the tomb we found several small alabaster vases and fragments of alabaster both yellowish and grey. There had been several other mummies in the tomb; the coffins were much broken up and very brittle, owing to the white ants. We found one or two pieces with the colours that remained beautifully bright... One only was in a fairly perfect state inside, the hieroglyphics were roughly painted in black on a cream ground, the figure outlined in black and red. We found some broken flint-tipped arrows here and another oyster shell with the name of Usertesene I engraved on it...

Again, the arrows were attested in the “court type burial” of the king’s daughter, Nubhetepti-khered. Eight arrows were found with a mace, staves, sceptres, and many other royal insignia, inside a wooden box.⁴⁰ This suggests that they were used for a ritual rather than military purpose.⁴¹

In further support, two oyster shells were found together with an ivory tusk. The first one was found at Qubbet el-Hawa Aswan, as I have indicated (see above). The second (MMA 22.I.63) was found at Lisht shaft 378 –the cemetery south of the pyramid, at the south east corner of the pyramid platform– by the MMA excavations 1920-1921.⁴² The archaeological finds from this shaft burial were studied by Stephen Quirke.⁴³ It is usually dated from mid-Twelfth to early Thirteenth Dynasty, based on the “bead apron” with lily beads from the burial which is similar to that found with Senebtisi (MMA 08.200.29). Furthermore, the base of a statuette found in this burial [?] shows a title, *nbt-pr*, which is rarely found before the late Twelfth Dynasty. The pottery types and a faience hippopotamus, also point to the same date.⁴⁴ S. Quirke suggests that these oyster shells should be dated to the late Middle Kingdom and that they are not contemporary to the named king, i.e. Senwosret I.⁴⁵ This point of view is supported by the suggestion that many of the scarabs bearing royal names of the early Twelfth Dynasty do not show the features and designs of this time, but were produced long after their reigns to demonstrate posthumous veneration of the king.⁴⁶ The cult of Senwosret I and Senwosret III found its way to Buhen, after their death, in the Thirteenth Dynasty.⁴⁷ The cult of the kings

³⁸ H. WILLEMS, *The Coffin of Heqata*, p. 18.

³⁹ L.W. CECIL, *op. cit.*, pp. 71–72. A third oyster shell was found at Aswan (CG 12825/JdE 30381) earlier (1893) than the excavations of Lady William Cecil. It has the royal birth name, Senwosret: G.A. REISNER, *Amulets II* (CG 12528-13595), p. 38 [12825], pl. 10.

⁴⁰ W. GRAJETZKI, *Tomb Treasures of the Late Middle Kingdom*, pp. 73–74, fig. 59.

⁴¹ H. WILLEMS, *Chests of life*, pp. 204, 226. The arrows were shown under the bed of Osiris: W. GRAJETZKI, *Harageh*, pp. 28–29.

⁴² S. QUIRKE, *op. cit.*, p. 154.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 153–155.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

⁴⁶ D. BEN-TOR, *Scarabs, Chronology, and Interconnections; Egypt and Palestine in the Second Intermediate Period*, OBO 27, 2007, p. 7, 36; B. KEMP, R.S. MERRILLEES, *Minoan Pottery in Second Millennium Egypt*, Cairo, 1980, p. 41; S. QUIRKE, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

⁴⁷ B. KEMP, R.S. MERRILLEES, *loc. cit.*; S. QUIRKE, *loc. cit.*

Senwosret III and Amenemhat III continued in Fayum up to the Twentieth Dynasty and the Ptolemaic period respectively.⁴⁸ This Lisht shaft burial also contained several cowrie and three round shells which are pierced for suspension.⁴⁹ Taken with the beadwork apron, which is similar to Senebtisi, perhaps this indicates a female burial, as the cowrie and shell pendants were rarely worn by men,⁵⁰ so our oyster shells could be linked to females rather than to males.⁵¹ The oyster shells were also painted and depicted as amulets on the female figurines of late Middle Kingdom (statuette of lady Dedetamun MMA 19.3.1,⁵² faience figurine Egyptian Museum Berlin 9583,⁵³ faience figurine from the tomb of Neferhotep at Deir el Bahari),⁵⁴ and in the wall scenes of tombs,⁵⁵ so this could again support the idea that these were more probably linked to females.⁵⁶ They imitate the shape of the real oyster shells and had the same purpose, i.e. amuletic.⁵⁷ This could discount the point of view of H.E. Willems that the aforementioned oyster shell (JdE 36398, currently at the Nubian Museum) date to early Middle Kingdom, the time of Senwosret I, and the function of being a military badge of a soldier.⁵⁸ This could also discount the point of view of Janine Bourriau, who assumed that the oyster shells with the prenomen Kheperkara having double strokes on the horizontal bar, should be dated to early Middle Kingdom (Senwosret I/Amenemhat II).⁵⁹ The examination of the method of J. Bourriau, using the set of the Middle Kingdom stelae-with plates-, which are published in William K. Simpson,⁶⁰ and Catalogue General of Egyptian Museum Cairo,⁶¹ points to a different point of view. On stelae which do have the cartouche of the kings Senwosret I/Kheperkara or Amenemhat II/Nubkaura and the *ka*-sign, it is not written with those two vertical strokes.⁶² The stelae which are attested with those two strokes, do not bear

48 L. HABACHI, *Features of the Deification of Ramesses II*, Glückstadt, 1969, p. 47.

49 S. QUIRKE, op. cit., p. 154.

50 Cf. U. DUBIEL, op. cit., pp. 156–157.

51 Cf. J. BOURRIAU, “Patterns of Change in Burial Customs”, in S. Quirke (ed.), *Middle Kingdom Studies*, Kent, 1991, p. 4; see also: H. WILLEMS, *Historical and Archaeological Aspects of Egyptian Funerary Culture: Religious Ideas and Ritual Practice in Middle Kingdom Elite Cemeteries*, Culture and History of the Ancient Near East 73, Leiden, 2014.

52 A. LANSING, “The Egyptian Expedition 1916–1919: II. Excavations in the Asasif at Thebes. Season of 1918–19”, *BMMMA* 15, 1920, pp. 16, 18, fig. 8; C. ANDREWS, *Catalogue of Egyptian Antiquities*, p. 93.

53 J.H. BREASTED, *Egyptian Servant Statues*, New York, 1948, pl. 90 [b]; C. ANDREWS, loc. cit.; cf. MMA 08.200.18 (faience, H. 12.7 cm, Lisht).

54 H.E. WINLOCK, *Excavations at Deir el Bahri: 1911–1931*, New York, 1942, p. 72, pl. 35 [upper]; C. ANDREWS, loc. cit.

55 A.M. BLACKMAN, *The Rock Tombs of Meir*, VI, London, 1953, p. 23, pl. xi (lower register, left, 4th lady); see also: W. GRAJETZKI, *Tomb Treasures of the Late Middle Kingdom*, p. 183.

56 Cf. R. ENGELBACH, *Riqqeh and Memphis* VI, BSAE 25, London, 1915, p. 12, pl. 1 [1].

57 C. ANDREWS, *Amulets of Ancient Egypt*, London, 1994, p. 43; C. ALDRED, op. cit., pp. 131–132.

58 H. WILLEMS, *The Coffin of Heqata*, pp. 21, 24–25.

59 J. BOURRIAU, *Pharaohs and Mortals*, p. 154. Later (J. BOURRIAU, “Patterns of Change in Burial Customs”, pp. 11–12), she confirmed that a set of new objects are attested late Middle Kingdom. Some oyster shells were found together with these objects including ivory tusks and a shabti as I have discussed in the article.

60 W.K. SIMPSON, *The Terrace of the Great God at Abydos: The Offering Chapels of Dynasties 12 and 13*, New Haven, 1974.

61 H.O. LANGE, H. SCHÄFER, *Grab- und Denksteine des Mittleren Reichs im Museum von Kairo*, 4 vols., CG 20001–20780, Berlin, 1902–1908.

62 W.K. SIMPSON, op. cit., pls. 12 [ANOC 5.3], 14 [ANOC 6.2], 15 [ANOC 6.3], 22 [ANOC 13.2], 44 [ANOC 29.1], 46 [ANOC 30.1], 48 [ANOC 31.1]; H.O. LANGE, H. SCHÄFER, op. cit., taf. 35 [20516], 39 [20541], 41–42 [20539]; sole example (CG 20141, Abydos) is attested for *hpr-kj-rj* with two strokes, but the hand is not clenched: H.O. LANGE, H. SCHÄFER, op. cit., taf. xiii [20141, upper register].

a cartouche with a name of a king.⁶³ It seems that the two upright strokes on the horizontal bar of the *ka*-sign could not set a precise date for the chronology of these oyster shells, but the shape of the hands is the most significant. The *ka*-sign with loop hands, which is attested on the oyster shells with the prenomen Kheperkare, is also shown on some stelae. Those stelae are dated to the Thirteenth Dynasty,⁶⁴ or later.⁶⁵

A large oyster shell (MFA Boston 13.3626, H. 14.8 cm, W. 12.4 cm) was found at Sheikh Farag, S.F. 42, by the Harvard University-Boston Museum of Fine Arts Expedition in 1913. It was given to the MFA by the Egyptian government, as a result of the division of finds. It is plain and does not have any cartouche, compared to our current oyster shell or the other shell found at Sheikh Farag, S.F. 5 (MFA Boston 13.3532),⁶⁶ which is incised with the royal birth name Senwosret I. Boston S.F. 42, which is not published, has clues that point to the late Middle Kingdom. An uninscribed limestone shabti (MFA Boston 13.3587),⁶⁷ and a faience Taweret amulet (MFA Boston 13.3597) were found among the unpublished archaeological finds.⁶⁸ S.F. 218 contained two oyster shells, one a real, uninscribed, oyster shell (MFA Boston 13.3806, H. 9.5 cm, W. 9.3 cm), and a smaller copper oyster shell with copper kohl stick (MFA Boston 13.5576).⁶⁹ The different beads (MFA Boston 13.304, 13.5575) with kohl stick and the small pierced copper shell may again point to a female burial, and S.F. 218 contained remains of female interments.⁷⁰ This rock-cut grave is dated to late Middle Kingdom and should belong to a mid-high level class individual.⁷¹

After the reign of the king Senwosret II major changes happened in burial customs and in the political landscape. Provincial elite cemeteries e.g. Beni Hasan, Meir, Bersheh and Asyut disappeared while others of lower status continued e.g. el-Kab, Rifeh, Qau.⁷² Decorated coffins became rare in the late Middle Kingdom, and the wooden models of the early Middle

63 W.K. SIMPSON, op. cit., pls. 25 [ANOC 16.1-2], 51 [ANOC 33.1], 81 [ANOC 59.3]; H.O. LANGE, H. SCHÄFER, op. cit., taf. 6 [20059], 15 [20177], 51 [20680].

64 W. GRAJETZKI, *Two Treasurers of the Late Middle Kingdom*, BAR IS 1007, 2001, p. 69 [Hannover 2932, Leiden 31, Toulouse 1, Vienna AS 135, 163, 181]; M. MARÉE, "Edfu under the Twelfth to Seventeenth Dynasties: The Monuments in the National Museum of Warsaw", *BMSAES* 12, 2009, pp. 43–50, fig. 7 [Warsaw 141262: cf. fig. 8a-b], 47–48, fig. 9 [Tübingen 463], 50, fig. 10 [Warsaw 141295, it also has two upright strokes]; BM EA 215 [top register, right] and 252 [middle register]: the online catalogue of the British Museum London; H.O. LANGE, H. SCHÄFER, op. cit., taf. 54 [20720].

65 M. MARÉE, "A Sculpture Workshop at Abydos from the Late Sixteenth or Early Seventeenth Dynasty", in M. Marée (ed.), *The Second Intermediate Period (Thirteenth-Seventeenth Dynasties): Current Research, Future Prospects*, OLA 192, 2010, p. 255.

66 G.A. REISNER, "Note on the Statuette of a Blind Harper in the Cairo Museum", *JEA* 6/2, 1920, p. 117: the limestone kohl jar with stand (MFA 13.3536a-b) and the many beads (MFA 13.3533, 13.3538, 13.3543, 13.3544, 13.5243) which were found together with the oyster shell may indicate that this burial was for a female.

67 K.R. KROENKE, *The Provincial Cemeteries of Naga ed-Deir: A Comprehensive Study of Tomb Models Dating from the Late Old Kingdom to the Late Middle Kingdom*, PhD Thesis, Berkeley, 2010, p. 36.

68 Fifteen amulets including a faience hawk, wedjat eye, hippo head, Taweret and other miscellaneous amulets, and two amazonite hippo head amulets. Two small shells have not been accessioned and therefore do not appear on the MFA website.

69 K.R. KROENKE, op. cit., pp. 64 [n. 526], 120, 159, 347 [fig. 98], 649. A limestone boat (MFA 13.3796), copper ring (MFA 13.5574) and blue faience falcon amulet (MFA 13.3812) were also found in this burial.

70 K.R. KROENKE, op. cit., pp. 121, 124.

71 Ibid., pp. 120–121, 663, 670.

72 J. BOURRIAU, op. cit., p. 10.

Kingdom also fell out of use.⁷³ A set of new objects became more important for eternal life, e.g. ivory tusks for the magical subjects which are shown on them, shabtis, and female figurines.⁷⁴ The oyster shells should be added to the list of these objects.

Golden oyster shells with royal names are attested since the reign of the King Senwosret II (MMA 26.7.1353, L. 2.5 cm)⁷⁵ and Senwosret III (Manchester Museum 5968, H. 2 cm, W. 2.1 cm; Egyptian Museum Cairo JdE 48393) forward.⁷⁶ They were attested, but without royal names, in the royal princesses' burials of the late Twelfth Dynasty in the treasures of Mereret,⁷⁷ Khenmet,⁷⁸ Sathathor,⁷⁹ and Nubhetepi-khered⁸⁰ at Dahshur and in the burial of Senebtisi at Lisht.⁸¹ Based on the suggested date of the real oyster shells, i.e. late Middle Kingdom, it is likely that these golden oyster shells of royal family were made to imitate the real oyster shells of non royal individuals. The jewellery of the royal princesses in the Middle Kingdom, especially in the second half of the Twelfth Dynasty, e.g. Sathatoriunet, Sathator, Mereret, contains the king's name, a habit which was not encountered in the Old Kingdom (e.g. the jewellery of the Queen Hetepheres, the mother of King Khufu), as the name of the king had become a powerful amulet.⁸² Oyster shells could be used for a protective and ornamental use.⁸³

To conclude, the yellow and dark stains and linen imprints which were noticed inside MMA 23.2.76a show the signs of funerary exploitation. These stains and linen imprints are from the mummy-wrappings, not from the tag, as Winlock assumed. They prove that this oyster shell and the tag were not found together. This outcome discounts Winlock's point of view on the function of the oyster shells being a military badge. The presence of such stains on other oyster shells without well-known provenance in museum collections could shed

⁷³ W. GRAJETZKI, *Tomb Treasures of the Late Middle Kingdom*, p. 4.

⁷⁴ J. BOURRIAU, op. cit., pp. 11–12.

⁷⁵ C. LILYQUIST, "On [Late] Middle Kingdom Style, with Reference to Hard Stone Scarabs, Inlaid Jewels, and Beni Hasan", *DE* 27, 1993, p. 47, n. 30; C. ALDRED, op. cit., pp. 131–132; C.R. CLARK, "Egyptian Granular Jewellery", *BMMA* 23, 1928, p. 249; For other golden and silver oyster shells see: C. ANDREWS, *Catalogue of Egyptian Antiquities*, p. 93.

⁷⁶ R. ENGELBACH, *Riqqeh and Memphis VI*, BSAE 25, London, 1915, p. 12 [28], pl. 1 [4]; C. ANDREWS, loc. cit.; A. LANSING, "The Museum's Excavations at Lisht", *BMMA* 19, 1924, pp. 41–42, fig. 11. Some oyster shells are engraved with the birth name of King Senwosret I (University Museums Durham EG459: BM EA65281: E.R. RUSSMANN, *Eternal Egypt: Master Works of Ancient Art from the British Museum*, London, 2001, p. 109). The name of the king could be added later to the original golden shells, so the inscriptions are not authentic. The microscopic examination shows that the method which was used applying the inscriptions is engraving; this technique was not in use at this date: M. JONES, *Fake? The Art of Deception*, London, 1990, p. 278 [306]; C. ANDREWS, op. cit., p. 63 [406], pl. 32.

⁷⁷ J. DE MORGAN, *Fouilles à Dahchour I*, pp. 64 [3]–65 [4–5, 10], pls. 20 [4], 22 [3], 23 [10]; C. ANDREWS, *Amulets*, p. 43; C. ANDREWS, *Catalogue of Egyptian Antiquities*, p. 93; A. WILKINSON, *Ancient Egyptian Jewellery*, p. 61; cf. H.E. WINLOCK, "Elements from the Dahshur Jewellery", *ASAE* 33, 1933, p. 38 [h].

⁷⁸ J. DE MORGAN, *Fouilles à Dahchour II*, p. 67 [63], pl. 12 [63].

⁷⁹ J. DE MORGAN, op. cit., p. 60 [6–7], pls. 16 [7]–17 [6].

⁸⁰ C. ANDREWS, loc. cit.; F.G.H. PRICE, *A Catalogue of the Egyptian Antiquities in the Possession of F.G. Hilton Price*, II, London, 1908, p. 51 [4436].

⁸¹ C. ANDREWS, loc. cit.; H.E. WINLOCK, A.C. MACE, *The Tomb of Senebtisi at Lisht*, p. 60, pls. 22–32.

⁸² A. WILKINSON, *Ancient Egyptian Jewellery*, pls. 15–18, 21–22; W. GRAJETZKI, *Tomb Treasures of the Late Middle Kingdom*, pp. 40 [26–7]–41 [29], 84 [66], 89 [68–69]; cf. R.J. LEPROHON, *The Great Name Ancient Egyptian Royal Titulary*, *Writings from the Ancient World* 33, 2013, pp. 5, 17–19.

⁸³ C. ALDRED, op. cit., p. 132.

light on their use. The attestation of three oyster shells (MFA Boston 13.3626, MMA 22.1.63, JdE 36398 currently Nubian Museum Aswan) with an ivory tusk (Lisht), dagger (Aswan), and a shabti (Sheikh Farag), as I have mentioned above, may indicate a late Middle Kingdom date for those oyster shells rather than early Middle Kingdom and Senwosret/Kheperkara's reign. The palaeography of the *ka*-sign with the loop hands supports this idea, as it points to a late Middle Kingdom date. The absence of wooden models in the burials of Lisht, Sheikh Farag, and Esna (IM Jerusalem 76.19.198, National Museums Liverpool, World Museum 1977.110.1),⁸⁴ where four oyster shells were found, may also point to late Middle Kingdom, although one may object that it is an *a silentio* argument. Perhaps the golden oyster shells of the royal princesses of the same period were made to imitate the real oyster shells with the royal names, Senwosret/Kheperkara.

⁸⁴ D. DOWNES, op. cit., p. 59 [36E and 263]; A.M.M. OUDA, "Two Inscribed Middle Kingdom Oyster Shells from Esna/ Reconstructing their Archaeological Context", *CdE* 94/187, 2019, pp. 49–58.



FIG. 1. Front and back of MMA 23.2.76a.

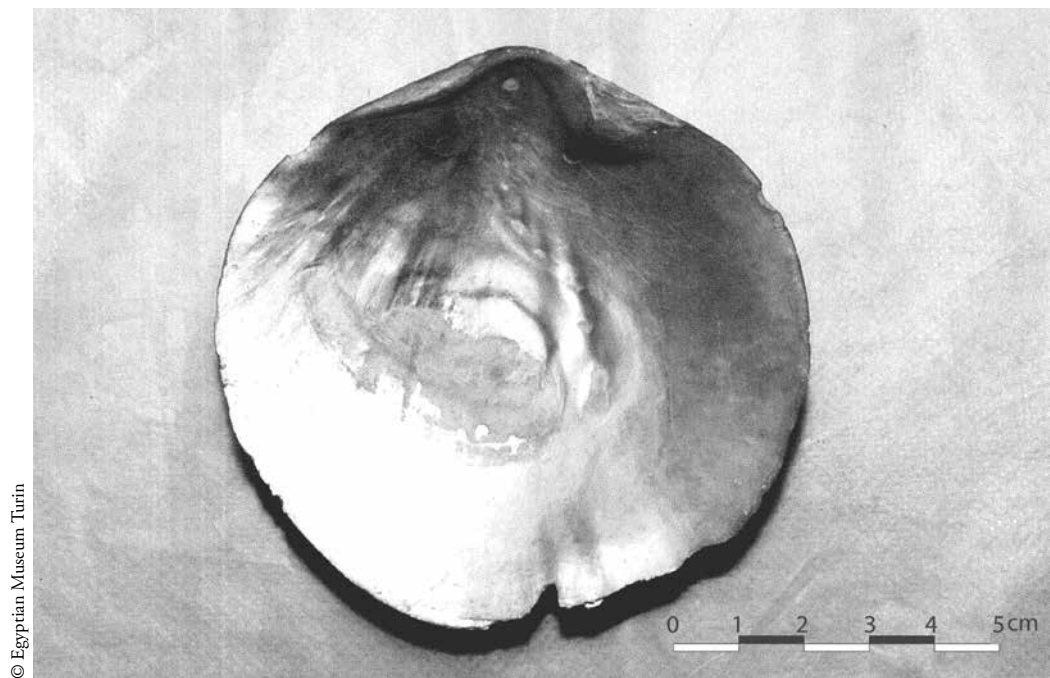


FIG. 2. Front and back of Egyptian Museum Turin S. 14130.

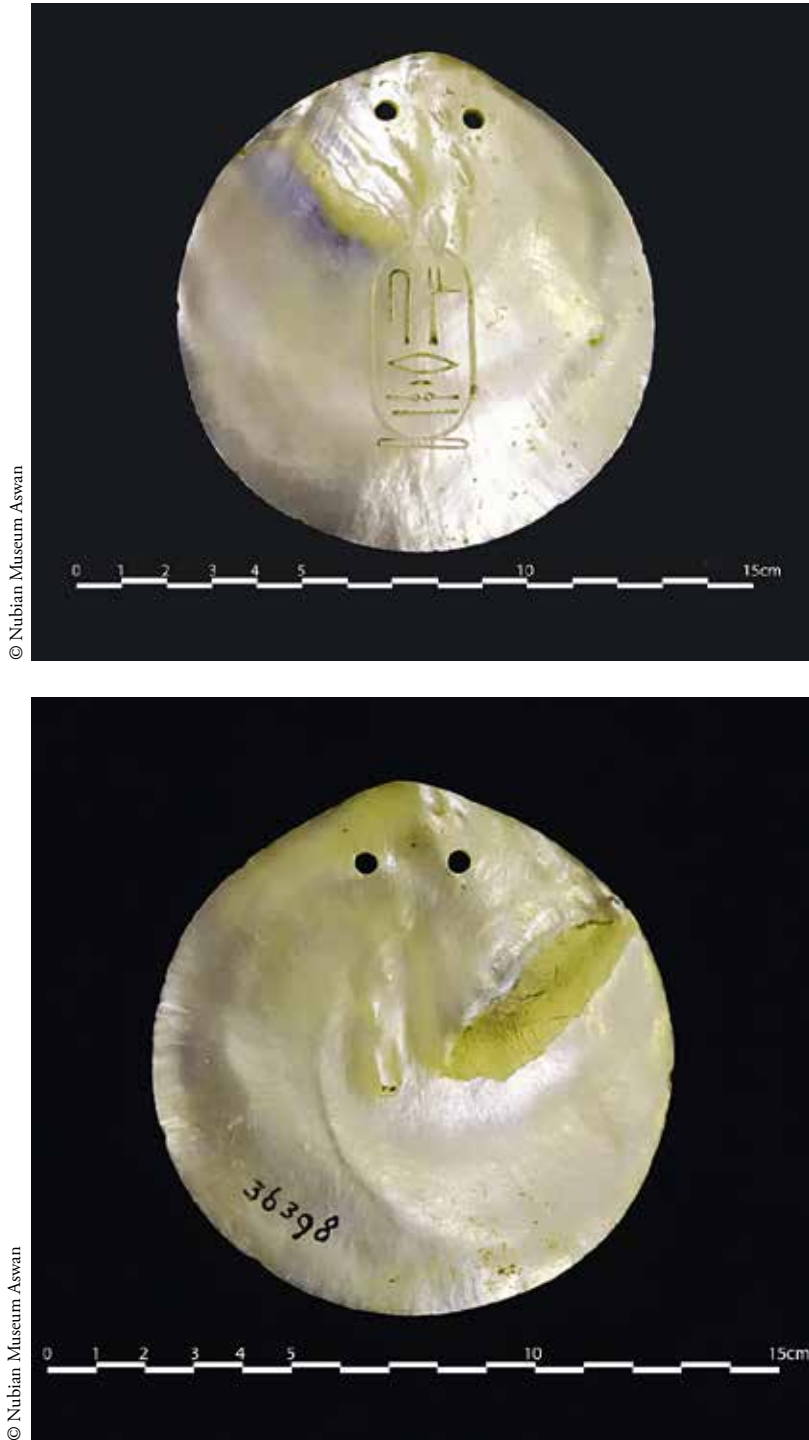


FIG. 3. Front and back of JdE 36398 (currently the Nubian Museum Aswan).