

Breaking the *dšr.t*-Vessels. An Ancient Egyptian Fragmentation Rite



About Access Archaeology

Access Archaeology offers a different publishing model for specialist academic material that might traditionally prove commercially unviable, perhaps due to its sheer extent or volume of colour content, or simply due to its relatively niche field of interest. This could apply, for example, to a PhD dissertation or a catalogue of archaeological data.

All *Access Archaeology* publications are available as a free-to-download pdf eBook and in print format. The free pdf download model supports dissemination in areas of the world where budgets are more severely limited, and also allows individual academics from all over the world the opportunity to access the material privately, rather than relying solely on their university or public library. Print copies, nevertheless, remain available to individuals and institutions who need or prefer them.

The material is refereed and/or peer reviewed. Copy-editing takes place prior to submission of the work for publication and is the responsibility of the author. Academics who are able to supply print-ready material are not charged any fee to publish (including making the material available as a free-to-download pdf). In some instances the material is type-set in-house and in these cases a small charge is passed on for layout work.

Our principal effort goes into promoting the material, both the free-to-download pdf and print edition, where *Access Archaeology* books get the same level of attention as all of our publications which are marketed through e-alerts, print catalogues, displays at academic conferences, and are supported by professional distribution worldwide.

The free pdf download allows for greater dissemination of academic work than traditional print models could ever hope to support. It is common for a free-to-download pdf to be downloaded hundreds or sometimes thousands of times when it first appears on our website. Print sales of such specialist material would take years to match this figure, if indeed they ever would.

This model may well evolve over time, but its ambition will always remain to publish archaeological material that would prove commercially unviable in traditional publishing models, without passing the expense on to the academic (author or reader).



Breaking the *dšr.t*-Vessels

An Ancient Egyptian Fragmentation Rite

Elena L. Hertel

Access Archaeology





ARCHAEOPRESS PUBLISHING LTD
Summertown Pavilion
18-24 Middle Way
Summertown
Oxford OX2 7LG
www.archaeopress.com

ISBN 978-1-80327-587-1
ISBN 978-1-80327-588-8 (e-Pdf)

© Elena L. Hertel and Archaeopress 2023

Cover: Pyramid Text spell 244 in the pyramid of Unas (drawing by the author)

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the copyright owners.

This book is available direct from Archaeopress or from our website www.archaeopress.com

Contents

List of Figures	iii
Acknowledgments	iv
Introduction	1
Goal and Definition	1
On the Necessity of a Re-Evaluation	1
Methodology and Structure	3
The BdV in Egyptological Literature	4
History of Previous Research	4
Phase 1: Identification	4
Phase 2: Contextualisation	6
Phase 3: Attribution of Archaeological Evidence	8
Interpretations of the BdV	9
The BdV as a Rite Against Evil.....	10
Proponent Arguments.....	10
Problems.....	11
The BdV as Disposing of Vessels	15
Proponent Arguments.....	15
Problems.....	16
How to Move Forward.....	18
The Concept of Intentional Damaging of Objects: Fragmentation Theory	19
Interpreting the Intentional Fragmentation of Objects	19
Implications of Fragmentation Theory for the BdV.....	21
Forms of Intentional Fragmentation of Objects in Ancient Egypt	22
The <i>dšr.wt</i> – Appearance, Use, and Purpose	25
<i>dšr.t</i> -Vessels in the Old Kingdom.....	25
<i>dšr.t</i> -Vessels in the Middle Kingdom	25
<i>dšr.t</i> -Vessels in the New Kingdom.....	28
<i>dšr.t</i> -Vessels After the New Kingdom	31
<i>dšr.t</i> -Vessels in Archaeological Contexts	32
Conclusion on <i>dšr.t</i> -Vessels	33

Contextualising the BdV	35
The Pyramid Texts	35
The Old Kingdom Private Contexts	37
The BdV in the Middle Kingdom	37
The BdV Scene in the Luxor Temple	39
The <i>dšr.wt</i> in the BdV	41
The New Kingdom Vessel-Breaking Scenes	42
Summary and Conclusion	48
Appendix	51
Appendix Table 1.....	51
Appendix Table 2.....	53
Appendix Table 3.....	54
Catalogue	55
A1 – <i>dšr.wt</i> in the Old Kingdom.....	55
A2 – <i>dšr.wt</i> in the Middle Kingdom	55
A3 – <i>dšr.wt</i> in the New Kingdom.....	64
A4 – <i>dšr.wt</i> after the New Kingdom.....	72
B1 – BdV in the Old Kingdom	74
B2 – BdV in the Middle Kingdom.....	79
B3 – BdV in the New Kingdom	80
B4 – Vessel-Breaking Scenes in New Kingdom Private Tombs	80
Bibliography and Abbreviations.....	88

List of Figures

Figure 1.	Comparison of PT 244 with spells for purification, anointing, the ritual offering of food and drink, and the Opening of the Mouth Ritual	12
Figure 2.	Chronological distribution of textual, iconographical, and archaeological sources of pottery fragmentation contexts	16
Figure 3.	<i>dšr.t</i> -Vessels on Middle Kingdom Coffins	26
Figure 4.	Shape of the <i>dšr.wt</i> depicted in the Middle Kingdom	27
Figure 5.	Shape of the <i>dšr.wt</i> classifier in the Middle Kingdom.....	28
Figure 6.	Shape of <i>dšr.wt</i> depictions and classifiers in the New Kingdom.....	30
Figure 7.	<i>dšr.t</i> -Vessels among tools for the Opening of the Mouth Ritual (above) and the offering of food and drink (below) in the forecourt of TT 75	31
Figure 8.	<i>dšr.t</i> -Vessels and <i>nms.t</i> -Vessels found in Giza	33
Figure 9.	Attestations of CT 926 on Middle Kingdom coffins	38
Figure 10.	Vessel breaking scene in the tomb of Horemheb at Saqqara	43
Figure 11.	Present and absent elements in the New Kingdom vessel-breaking scenes	44
Figure 12.	Shape of vessels in the New Kingdom vessel-breaking scenes.....	45

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank all those who supported me during the research and its subsequent publication. First of all, Olaf Kaper and Miriam Müller who supervised my MA thesis, which this publication is based on, for their advice, encouragement, constructive criticism, and, most of all, for supporting and guiding me in the early steps of my academic career. The same goes for Koen Donker van Heel, who, although not actively involved in this research (everyone who knows Koen will be well aware of what he thinks about pottery), has given me constant support during my MA and afterwards, and I am truly grateful for that.

Furthermore, I would like to thank my peers and friends in Leiden who put up with endless discussions about rituals and pots, primarily Charlotte Dietrich, Mathijs Smith, Vera Rondano, and Martina Landrino. A particularly heartfelt ‘thank you’ goes to Geirr Lunden for proofreading nearly all of my chapters and for giving his constructive and honest opinion on how to improve the study all along the way. My family has, as ever, my deepest gratitude for their emotional support and for believing in my choices.

I am thankful to the committee of the NINO Thesis Prize, who kindly awarded me second place in the 2019 prize for my MA thesis, and who encouraged me to publish the results of my work, leading to this publication. Furthermore, I am indebted to those responsible for the Adriaan De Buck Archive in Leiden, and the Schott Archive of the University Trier, for their kind permissions for me to use and publish some photographs from their archive.

Introduction

Goal and Definition

In ancient Egyptian thought, the funerary procedure played a key role in the transition to the afterlife. The Pyramid Texts and the depictions in private tombs show a highly evolved funerary ritual as early as the Old Kingdom. This ritual involved a great number of individual rites which, as a whole, would ensure a safe transition to the realm of the dead and a pleasant afterlife for the deceased. While some of these rites are well studied and understood, others have not been explored to a point where their meaning is entirely clear. One of these is the rite of ‘Breaking the *dšr.t*-Vessels’. The aim of this study is to provide a better understanding of this rite.

This study is centred on what the ancient Egyptian texts refer to as *sd dšr.wt* (*sd* ‘(to) break’; *dšr.wt* ‘(the) *dšr.t*-Vessels’). In previous literature, the vessels are generally referred to as ‘red vessels’ or ‘red pots’, but I have decided to use the Egyptian term due to the uncertainties in the etymology and translation of the name.¹ While the rite has been connected to several different contexts and primary sources, I argue that a careful differentiation between evidence identified as such is necessary. In this study I aim to demonstrate that there is a meaningful discrepancy between textual, iconographical, and archaeological sources, which is reason to question the initial identification as a *sd dšr.wt* context. On a level of terminology, I therefore choose to restrict my definition of the ‘Breaking the *dšr.t*-Vessels’ rite (subsequently shortened to BdV) to what the ancient Egyptian sources refer to as *sd dšr.wt*, providing a stable starting point for the study. Whether or not the iconographical and archaeological sources interpreted as ‘Breaking of the Red Vessels’ by modern scholars match the criteria to be a manifestation of the rite, and should therefore be addressed as BdV, is to be discussed only in a secondary step, after the core of the *sd dšr.wt* has been explored as thoroughly as possible.

On the Necessity of a Re-Evaluation

Despite the rather scarce number of attestations of the BdV, it is relatively often discussed in secondary literature. Being part of the final funerary rites, it is often mentioned in publications dealing with the topic of the deceased’s transition to the afterlife. Early interpretations of the BdV also connected it to execration rituals, causing it to occasionally appear in research on ancient Egyptian execration rites and magic. However, the BdV has never been the centre of a detailed study exploring its dynamics and evolution, which appears overdue by now, especially considering its entanglement with these different spheres of ancient Egyptian belief and the implications that a re-interpretation of the BdV may mean for them. Furthermore, recent scholarship has drawn attention to more and more contexts of intentionally damaged objects in ancient Egypt. As one of the few textual attestations of an ancient rite featuring the intentional damaging of an object,² a thorough investigation of the BdV is an important step towards the study of concepts of fragmentation in ancient Egyptian culture.

¹ Other common terms are ‘red vases’, or ‘redware’ in English, ‘Rote Töpfe’ or ‘Rote Krüge’ in German, and ‘vases rouges’ in French. I use the word ‘vessels’ due to its neutrality concerning shape and usage.

² In Egyptian context, one could add some ritual instructions such as the order to burn wax figurines in the context of a ritual against Apophis mentioned in pBremner-Rhind, or the instruction to burn and drink papyrus (Kühne-Wespi 2019b) as a form of fragmentation, see also below.

Even though the BdV frequently appears in scholarly works, the interpretations of the exact function and purpose of the rite are varied. This is due to the fact that none of the ancient Egyptian evidence gives any unambiguous information about the intention of the ritualists or the goal that the rite was supposed to achieve. This forces scholars to base explanations on the interpretation of the symbolic value of the vessels and the act of deliberate breaking. One reason for the ambiguity is surely that the study of intentional damaging of pottery is neglected in Egyptology. Due to the strong philological roots of the field, all such evidence – both in archaeological and iconographical form – has been associated with the BdV as the only rite mentioning such a phenomenon in texts. The fact that an increasing number of different sources are labelled as BdV has led to a conflation of different contexts, making a coherent interpretation of the act impossible. As a result of this, it is nowadays assumed that the rite served multiple purposes at the same time.³

The identification of the archaeological evidence of the rite has been one of the main trouble spots in terms of the interpretation of the BdV. In particular, the association with vessels inscribed with execration texts has caused a discrepancy of contexts in which the BdV is located. This discrepancy was – rightfully – addressed with caution, and even concern, by some scholars. Jacobus van Dijk stated:

Our understanding of this ritual is hampered by the fact that the archaeological evidence on the one hand, and the textual and iconographical evidence on the other, though doubtless related, are of a different nature and seem to refer to a different ritual setting in each case. The two categories are therefore best discussed separately.⁴

This separate treatment of the textual and iconographical sources, and the archaeological evidence, has become common practice among scholars discussing the rite.⁵ I argue that this differentiation between the sources – obviously a result of the scholarly struggle to cover all forms of evidence defined as BdV under one conclusive interpretation – is alarming and calls for a re-evaluation of the rite and the various sources and meanings assigned to it. By means of a critical evaluation of the secondary literature on the BdV, as well as returning to the primary sources and carefully differentiating between ancient evidence and modern interpretations, I aim to de-tangle the different sources and interpretative layers and provide a new perspective on the BdV in its original form.

In order to do this, it is of uttermost importance to judge the evidence in its proper context, considering the impact chronological differences may have on the sources and the rite itself. One of the main problems of recent research on the BdV is the focus on the evidence dating to the New Kingdom, which appears to be one of the latest stages of the rite. Since the BdV has its first appearances in the Pyramid Texts, apparently already fully incorporated in the offering ritual,⁶ it seems safe to assume that the origins of this rite can be dated to the early Old Kingdom, if not before. It is important to give all phases equal attention, but also to acknowledge the large time span – about a millennium – between the different sets of evidence, while considering the potential effects of this on the evolution of the BdV.

³ The theory of a multiplicity of meaning was, e.g., explicitly stated by Budka (2014: 646), who assumed that the rite had several different semantic layers.

⁴ van Dijk 1993: 174.

⁵ E.g. Seiler 2005: 173–180; Budka 2010: 390–393; El-Shohoumi 2004: 216–224.

⁶ I follow Harco Willems in his definition of the term ‘offering ritual’ as a superordinate term, including the ritual offering of food and drink (often referred to as ‘Speiseritual’), and the ‘object ritual’ (Willems 1988: 206).