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Ptolemaic Period Foundation Deposits

Stability, continuity, and piety are three common themes that retain their importance throughout ancient Egyptian history. In art, politics, and religion the idea of change was never a quotidian concept. The ancient Egyptians prided themselves on their internal strength and existed to preserve themselves for eternity. It was not, however, only through immobile statues and structures or mummification that they sought to fulfill this desire. Foundation deposits, rarely studied though a regular find in the archaeological world, reflect this notion of preservation.

Foundation deposits most commonly are discovered inside or under the foundations of both secular and non-secular buildings. James Morris Weinstein, the only scholar to have done an extremely detailed study on foundation deposits, makes the distinction that deposits, “inserted in or beneath the structure after the dedication rites were finished do not qualify as foundation deposits” (1xix). True foundation deposits are often found under doorways, under the corners of buildings, or beneath the corners of individual rooms or halls in “royal and private tombs, temples, palaces, forts, and town walls” (1xix); however, the exact location where the ancient Egyptians were required to place them has not yet been defined.

If one considers how foundation deposits are such an ordinary find in archaeology, it is likely that these deposits would illustrate a theme of change over time. These alterations should be especially noticeable when foreign rulers seized power. This assertion would be valid if the

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foundation deposits, a likely a part of the religious ritual *The Foundation Ceremony*, had declined in significance once the foreign rulers, with their new religions and systems of government, took control. This hypothesis, however, does not hold true.

The focus of this paper is on Ptolemaic period foundation deposits. Because the Greeks followed their own religion, it is logical to believe that Egyptian foundation deposits would have fallen out of use once the Ptolemies took power. Yet foundation deposits remained popular through the Ptolemaic period and evolved in a smooth and consistent manner. By examining several specific examples of Ptolemaic period deposits and comparing them with earlier foundation deposits, it becomes clear why there are no abrupt changes in their content. The ancient Egyptians' motivations for using foundation deposits, according to Weinstein, were commemoration and sanctification. Thus, by continuing to support these two ideals, the Ptolemies would have had an easier time legitimizing their own rule over the Egyptians. It was only natural for them to continue to use foundation deposits.

Although foundation deposits have been found all over Egypt from the third dynasty into Christian times, Weinstein's dissertation remains the only comprehensive source on this topic to this day. It will be beneficial, however, to revisit his work in light of recent discoveries. At Temple T at the site of Mendes in the Egyptian delta, a foundation deposit was discovered during the summer of 2009. Weinstein writes that foundation deposits may be used in "comparative dating" (1xx11); thus, another goal of this paper is to compare the foundation deposit found at Mendes with those recorded in Weinstein's dissertation in order to attempt to date the deposit.

As there are few modern sources written on foundation deposits, there are even fewer ancient references to them. Weinstein, an empiricist thinker who uses material evidence in order to make probable statements about past societies, discovered only one reference to a foundation

deposit in all the records of ancient Egyptian reliefs. Dating to the fifth century, this carving depicts a kneeling man placing offerings into a U-shaped pit that already holds the head of a goose and a bovine (8, 27). This is the only known example of the placing of objects in a trench or pit at a foundation ceremony (8). As for the rest of the foundation ceremony, the most complete account of the entire ritual can be found at the temple at Edfu. The ten events listed on the walls at Edfu do not even hint at the existence of a foundation deposit. Other scholars, however, such as Richard H. Wilkinson, assume that the foundation deposit was a part of the ceremony. His list of the events is as follows:

- a. Fixing the plan of the building by “stretching the cord”
- b. Scattering gypsum on the assigned area to purify it
- c. Digging the first foundation trench
- d. Pouring sand into the foundation trench
- e. Molding the first brick or bricks
- f. Placement of foundation deposits at the corners of the structure, etc.
- g. Initiation of the work of building
- h. Purification of the completed temple
- i. Presentation of the temple to its intended deity/ies
- j. Offering of sacrifices (38)

Weinstein’s list looks like this:

1. King departs from his palace.
2. King arrives at the site of the new temple.
3. King “stretches the cord” with the goddess Seshat.
4. King digs the foundation trench.

5. King molds the first brick.
6. King pours sand into the foundation trench.
7. King places metal and stone plaques at the temple's four corners.
8. King initiates construction of the temple.
9. King purifies the temple.
10. King presents the temple to its god (6).

Wilkinson based his list off of earlier depictions, such as that of Thutmose III at the Small Temple at Medinet Habu, whereas Weinstein based his list off of the Ptolemaic Temple at Edfu. Weinstein mentions that numbers 1, 2, 7, and 8 only occur during and after the Ptolemaic Period (6). From Wilkinson's list, it appears that he is a more processual thinker who makes broad generalizations based on small amounts of data. For example, his number 6 is easily refuted because there is no hieroglyph that means "foundation deposit" that has been discovered (8). Also, his number 6 could only have been based on that single fifth-century carving mentioned earlier in this essay. Wilkinson is not the only scholar to have made generalizations like this in relation to foundation deposits. Byron E. Shafer also assumes that this fifth-century relief is indeed a foundation deposit and that all foundation deposits have a bovine head and a goose head (7). Somers Clarke, like Weinstein, admits that "foundation scenes make no reference to them [foundation deposits]" (60). So because foundation deposits, though they obviously were used, have few-to-no direct references in ancient Egyptian inscriptions, carvings, and wall paintings, it is difficult to determine their prominence in the foundation ceremony. In addition, it is necessary to avoid generalizations in this field due to the lack of historical written data.

When Alexander the Great conquered Egypt in 332 BCE, there were no drastic changes in the practice of ancient Egyptian religion. The Ptolemies went as far as to adopt the Egyptian

religion as their own, with only slight modifications. Alexander founded Alexandria and was even himself confirmed king by the temple of Amun's oracle (Schulz 291). His successor, Ptolemy I, elevated Serapis, a pantheistic deity, to a position of prominence. The traditional cults of Egypt, however, were never suppressed, and the Egyptians seemingly continued "carrying on as they had for thousands of years" (Weinstein 351). Byron E. Shafer writes that though the Ptolemaic rulers took control of the temples economically and politically, they "nonetheless supported them both as agricultural and religious institutions" (233). Thus, the temples constructed under the Ptolemies such as those at Philae, Denderah, Edfu, and Kom Ombo still reflected ancient Egyptian tradition, though minor modifications were made (see Shafer 185-237). Naturally, the foundation deposits reflect the change of leadership, though not as significantly as one may think.

The most significant change Egyptian foundation deposits ever went through occurred during the Ptolemaic Period: "The main development in foundation deposits during the Ptolemaic Period is a bifurcation of the deposits into two typological groups" (Weinstein 352). The first group follows the pattern laid down during the Late Period, whereas the other only occurs under Ptolemy III and Ptolemy IV (352). What is significant about the second group is that they have only been found under temples associated with "Graecized Egyptian divinities such as Serapis, Harpocrates, and Aphrodite Urania" (352). Thus, this group, though limited in use, reflects most clearly Ptolemaic influence. The most characteristic feature of these types of deposits is that they consist simply of inscribed plaques that often have bilingual dedicatory texts (352). A.J.B. Wace published an article in *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* that mentions several foundation deposits found at the Serapeum Temple in Alexandria that fit this description. Here is an account of one of these types of deposits:

At two of the angles of the great temenos, the south-east and the south-west, the foundation deposit plaques have been found *in situ*. These were laid in shallow pockets cut in the rock...Each deposit consisted of ten plaques of different materials...The Greek inscription...names Ptolemy III, Euergetes as the builder of the Serapeum...and was apparently written first in Greek and then translated into hieroglyphs. (106)

There is also another, similar one that Wace describes. These deposits are nearly uniform and, at the time of Weinstein's dissertation, had only been excavated from the Serapeum complex at Alexandria. Ironically, because Alexandria was founded by Alexander the Great, it makes sense for the foundation deposits that best reflect the new leadership to be found there. As the example cited above states, these deposits were found in small pits cut into bedrock. Both A.J.B. Wace and Weinstein suggest that the Greek was written before the hieroglyphic text on the plaques found at the Serapeum in Alexandria (Wace 106, Weinstein 367). This is significant because it would mean that the Ptolemaic priests were only imitating Egyptian tradition and not cherishing it, for instead of writing in the sacred text of the Egyptians, they chose to write first in their own language and then copy it into hieroglyphs.

The other group of foundation deposits that date to the Ptolemaic Period is a simplification of the tradition that existed between the XXVI and XXX dynasties (Weinstein 352). The contents of these deposits are also very uniform, and all the excavated examples have been associated with temple complexes dating to between the third and fourth centuries (353). The pits where these deposits are found are commonly shallow and without linings or coverings, sometimes even simply being dropped into the foundation sand (354). They consist of model mud bricks, a grinder and/or a grindstone, and small un-inscribed plaques. Rarely do these deposits include food offerings and/or pottery (356). Pierre Montet describes several foundation

deposits that fall into this category in his book *Les Énigmes de Tanis*. One dates to Ptolemy Soter and the other dates to Ptolemy IV. Both of the deposits have one or more plaques that commemorate the patron of the temple (i.e. the King) in hieroglyphs. Also present in these deposits were model mud bricks, small un-inscribed plaques, and very little pottery (see Montet 139-142). Montet describes the inscriptions as “*très lisible*” (141), which implies that the hieroglyphic text was very simple. This would make sense if those who wrote the inscriptions were not Egyptian, seeing as their first language would not have been Egyptian. The tools in these deposits, as Weinstein says, were very weak and it is difficult to even determine their use. Montet says that the point of having the inscriptions is very obvious : “*le but le plus évident, le plus constant est de conserver le nom du roi constructeur*” (144). Weinstein, however, believes that these foundation deposits were simply continuing the tradition followed during the Late Period in Egypt by the Egyptians.

As time progressed, the ancient Egyptian foundation deposit went through several stages, but ultimately resulted in the tradition exemplified by the Ptolemaic deposits. Though the earliest recorded foundation deposit dates to the third dynasty, the foundation ceremony—specifically the *pd šs*, or “stretching of the cord” ritual—dates all the way back to the Palermo Stone (Weinstein 24). This earliest foundation deposit only had “miniature attached limestone jars” (25). As one examines the early foundation deposits that date to the Old Kingdom, it is obvious that the first emphasis was on food (29). The major differences between these Old Kingdom deposits and the Ptolemaic deposits are significant. Obviously, the motivations have changed. In the Ptolemaic Period food had almost entirely lost its significance in the deposits as seen in the apparent lack of pottery vessels and rarity of grinders/grindstones (see Weinstein corpus for Ptolemaic deposits 374-395), whereas the earliest deposits only have food-related

objects. This grand distinction, however, shows not a break in the evolution of the foundation deposit, but rather a result of a two-thousand-year process of development.

As one moves into the later periods, the deposits become more elaborate, especially into the New Kingdom and into the XVIIIth dynasty. It is not until the Middle Kingdom that inscribed plaques begin to appear, and it is in the New Kingdom that such artifacts as amulets and less common metals start to emerge. Model mud bricks, tools, beads, and inscribed plaques are characteristic of Middle Kingdom deposits (Weinstein 41). Though this may seem similar to the Ptolemaic Period deposits, there are some small differences. Animal bones and pottery were still common in Middle Kingdom deposits such as at Deir el-Bahri, where the five deposits all had animal sacrifices (see Weinstein 64). Also, the inscribed plaques were slightly larger than the Ptolemaic Period plaques. For example, an alabaster plaque was found at Dra Abu el-Naga that measured 7.6 x 4.3 centimeters, whereas the plaques of the Ptolemaic Period are mostly less than 5 centimeters.

As one looks to the eighteenth dynasty, the foundation deposits become the most elaborate ever, but this tradition swiftly subsides into the tradition created by dynasties XXVI-XXX, which the Ptolemaic Period deposits follow. Weinstein lists around 125 deposits from this period alone, and around 100 of them come from the Thinite and Theban nomes (93). The conformity of these deposits is astonishing. Tools are better manufactured, amulets and scarabs start to show up, and there is a general increase in the size of the deposits (93). Also, the pits of the deposits of this period are brick-lined and often have coverings (228). An in-depth discussion of the variations of deposits that date to this time, however, is outside the realm of this paper. Let it suffice to say that the tradition of elaborate deposits that began in this period

disappeared by the XXVI dynasty, which is the tradition that is of more concern for the purposes of this work.

As early as the XIXth dynasty, animal sacrifices and model tools become less common (Weinstein 232). Also, pits start to fall out of fashion and priests begin simply dropping objects into the foundation trenches (250). In *Memphis I*, Sir Flinders Petrie mentions a deposit that dates to Ramses II's rule and includes "the finest deposit blocks that are known" (8). These blocks mention only the "high Priest of Ptah" (8). This deposit is an example of the common act of using a foundation plaque as a commemorative object. This tradition continues through Ptolemaic times as well.

It is the Late Period foundation deposits, however, that set the stage for the Ptolemaic trends. Most of the excavated deposits of this period, according to Weinstein, come from the Delta region (297). The contents of these deposits are so regular; Weinstein lists them as follows:

miniature, inscribed stone and metal plaque, a rectangular, green faience plaque, a model mud brick, resin and ore samples, a grinder and grindstone, the remains of a bovine sacrifice, and some pottery vessels. Somewhat less frequently the deposits have a semi-circular alabaster plaque and a few small, flimsy, copper/bronze model tools. (297)

Weinstein admits that the deposits between the Ptolemaic Period and the end of the Late Period are so similar that it is nearly impossible to tell them apart unless there is an inscribed artifact (305). It is natural, then, to state that the deposits of this era are a simplification of the earlier Ramesside Period deposits. As for the connection with the Ptolemaic deposits, one begins to see that what pottery is found is always limited to models, and the plaques rarely reach, much less

exceed, 7 centimeters (308). The first group of Ptolemaic Period deposits is a continuation of these Late Period deposits; however, the second group of deposits is a development created by the new leadership.

Therefore, it is now apparent that after hundreds of years of foundation deposits, there is hardly any major gap between periods. The minor changes, such as the short-lived appearance of amulets and scarabs in the deposits of the XVIIIth dynasty or the disappearance/reappearance of pottery and/or animal offerings, are gradual in nature. It is now necessary to analyze the methodologies and theories behind the study of foundation deposits in order to be able to accurately assess the possibility of dating the foundation deposits found at Mendes beneath Temple T in 2009.

As John Baines does in his work on the “Early Definitions of the Egyptian World and Its Surroundings,” Weinstein collects all relevant data, and then he makes a conclusion based on that data. It is not until after he thoroughly has stated his hypotheses, as laid out in his introduction, and written out all his empirical data, that he states and supports his conclusion. Weinstein, like Baines, is working with mostly un-inscribed artifacts and therefore must rely on his analytical ability to observe and, as objectively as possible, come to a plausible and well-supported conclusion. Whereas Weinstein examines foundation deposits in order to determine their use and development in Egyptian society, Baines examines plaques and other early records of Egyptian society in order to determine the political and social organization of ancient Egypt. These are both examples of empirical research.

It is impossible to make an accurate study of foundation deposits with a post-processual view on archaeological theory. Thus, the dispute between the empiricists and the post-processualists is important to note here briefly. The greatest difference between these two

opposing “camps” of archaeological theory is that supporters of empiricism believe knowledge of the past can be learned from both material and textual remains. On the other hand, post-processualists believe that it is impossible to separate those in the past from their cultures, as well as the interpreters of the past (i.e. the archaeologists) from their own cultures, and thus it is impossible to know anything about the past. Empiricists hold to the scientific method, whereas the post-processualists pride themselves on subjectivity and the interpretation of the past. Foundation deposits, being a material remnant, must be studied analytically before anyone can gather any information about the society or the people which/who made it (depending on which theory one supports).

At the time Weinstein wrote his dissertation, processualism was actually the major archaeological theory. When put into today’s context, however, Weinstein is more of an empiricist than a processualist. Processualists believed it possible to make cross-cultural generalizations based on the analysis of ethnographic factors and material remains (see Trigger on Baines and processual archaeology 414). Weinstein, though he made certain generalizations about Egyptian culture based on a relatively small amount of examples, was not a processualist. Though Renfrew’s writings on cognitive-processual archaeology came out much later than Weinstein’s dissertation, it seems as if Weinstein’s goal was similar to that of Renfrew’s: to scientifically study the material remains of a past society in order to come to an understanding of how the people who left these remains may have thought (see Renfrew’s “Towards a Cognitive Archaeology”). Weinstein studied material remains (i.e. foundation deposits) and attempted to figure out why they were there and thus how the people who put them there were thinking. The study of foundation deposits must be rooted in the scientific study of empirical data. And so, the study of the foundation deposit found at Mendes in 2009 will take this kind of approach.

The foundation deposit found at Temple T was very simple, only consisting of four artifacts. There was a model limestone cup, a carnelian bead, a small un-inscribed faience plaque, and a smooth limestone rectangle with rounded corners. Dr. Donald Redford, the current site supervisor of Mendes, believes, at the time this paper is being written, that the temple where this deposit was found dates to the Saïte or XXIX dynasty because the pottery found in the foundation trenches is between the sixth (540 BCE) and the early fourth century BCE (personal correspondence, Nov. 2009). First, if we look only at the contents of the foundation deposit, it is likely that it is a very late one; however, Dr. Redford assumes that the foundation deposit had been disturbed and was not found in its original location. The foundation deposit was found at the south end of the temple under a wall in the foundation sand. Above where the deposit was found is a probable doorway. Though Dr. Redford has not given his thoughts on the subject, the layout of the bricks suggests this. At the beginning of this season, two squares, T-D [E] and T-E [E], were opened in order to determine which way this temple faced. Hoping to find some evidence of this, possibly a pylon, it was expected that the entrance to the temple was at the eastern end. This would make the front of the temple facing the road that led up to the larger temple at the site of Mendes where the *naos* is located. Thus, it would make sense for the date of this larger temple to coincide with this small temple. It is largely believed that the *naoi* complex was built by Amasis (Hansen 10). He ruled Egypt in the XXVI dynasty between 570-576 BCE (Konemann 528). However, if we look at other foundation deposits that date to his time, such as other ones found at Mendes and at Tel Nebesheh, there is no similarity to this deposit. Beginning with the four intact deposits found at the Amasis temple in Mendes, the northeast deposits included the following:

31 small, rectangular plaques (inscribed with either the prenomen or nomen of
Amasis)

1 alabaster semi-circle

71 potter vessels

1 model grindstone

1 model grinder

Bovine skull and haunch (Weinstein 337, Hansen 9)

This deposit, as can be compared to the above descriptions, is a typical Late Period foundation deposit. By the time of the Ptolemaic group II deposits, plaques are rarely inscribed, the semi-circular alabaster plaques have fallen out of fashion, and pottery becomes virtually nonexistent (see Weinstein on Ptolemaic Period deposits 351-373). Hansen writes that the other three deposits contained similar objects to those found in the northeastern deposit (9). The four deposits found at Tel Nebesheh were also similar to the one listed above (see Weinstein 335-336). Thus, the difference between the deposit found at Temple T and those found at the sanctuary of Amasis at Mendes is significant. Though it is impossible to tell the actual reason for the difference between these two deposits, time may have had something to do with it. The existence of the fortification wall of Ptolemy II that surrounds the entire religious complex adds to the idea that it is possible that this temple dates to the Ptolemaic Period. According to Dr. Redford, Ptolemy II came to Mendes to rebuild after the Persians destroyed it (personal correspondence, July 2009). The deposit excavated in the summer of 2009 at Temple T contained no pottery vessels, grinders, grindstones, semi-circular plaques, animal sacrifices, nor inscriptions. All these characteristics hint at a Ptolemaic date; however, because the deposit was possibly disturbed, according to Dr. Redford, it will be impossible to prove this concretely.

So, in summary, foundation deposits in Egypt gradually evolved as time went on. As for the effect of a change in leadership on the continuity of foundation deposits, there were only small alterations. The appearance of Greek text in addition to the traditional Egyptian hieroglyphs on certain plaques under the reigns of Ptolemy III and Ptolemy IV is the only observable change that has any direct connection to the fact that Greeks were ruling Egypt. Other than that, the deposits of the Ptolemaic Period (i.e. the group I deposits that constitute the vast majority of foundation deposits found in this era) are largely a continuation of the earlier tradition solidified during the Late Period.

As for using foundation deposits as a possible relative dating tool, there are several difficulties that arise. The study of foundation deposits requires an empirical approach in order to reveal viable conclusions, but there is a lack of published research on the subject. In addition, regarding the deposit found at Mendes in 2009, though from all evidence it is a Ptolemaic deposit, there is a possibility that it was not discovered *in situ*. Though deposits of the late Ptolemaic Period are known to have been simply dropped in the sand of the foundation trenches, if the deposit at Temple T were to date to an earlier period, it is possible that it was disturbed and that the location in which it was found is not its original. More information needs to be published in order to draw any tangible conclusions. It is important, however, to note that Weinstein's examples are mostly from large temple complexes, whereas the temple at Mendes was a small, possible outcrop of a major temple. Thus, the person who placed the foundation deposit in the trench may not have been a wealthy, upper-class individual. This is pure hypothesis; however, it is another explanation as to why this deposit was so simple.

Thus it is apt to conclude this paper with the current theories on the motivation behind the use of foundation deposits. Weinstein refers to Richard S. Ellis' book *Foundation Deposits in*

Ancient Mesopotamia when trying to determine the answer to this question. Ellis writes that foundation deposits in ancient Mesopotamia likely were the result of several motivational factors: sanctification, protection, commemoration, and elaboration (165-167). Though the first three are self-explanatory, the last may need some clarification. Ellis says that foundation deposits “were placed there simply to make the building more sumptuous and the ceremonies more solemn and impressive” (168). Though this is a very subjective interpretation and it is very difficult to support empirically, it is a logical conclusion. However, for the Egyptians at least, there is hardly any record of the existence of foundation deposits; thus, this was not likely a factor for them. It is obvious that one of the main reasons the Egyptians used foundation deposits was for commemoration. With the many examples of inscribed plaques and other artifacts that mention only the name of the one who commissioned or built the temple, this motivation is the most apparent. Also, Weinstein mentions that the existence of tools that were used during the foundation ceremony in many deposits could be another example of the wish to preserve the foundation ceremony (436). Protection was not likely a factor for the Egyptians either, unless one cites the existence of scarabs and amulets that appeared during the XVIII dynasty. Yet, this fad faded as fast as it appeared. As for sanctification, this may have been a motivation for the Egyptians and their rulers; however, we have no concrete evidence to support this conclusion. According to Weinstein, sanctification was “one of the principal functions of the Egyptian foundation deposit...to delimit and purify the sacred area within which the temple or tomb was built” (433). It is true that deposits often are found in groups of four and located under each of the corners of the temples. Weinstein assumes this to support his belief that sanctification was the principal role of foundation deposits in Egypt, but there is little other evidence to support this claim.

Weinstein also writes:

Even the incursion of foreign dynasts—the Hyksos, Libyans, Kushites, and Persians—had no apparent effect on the development of the Egyptian foundation deposit. The rulers of each of these foreign groups seem in fact to have completely adopted Egyptian custom in the use and type of offerings to be placed in foundation deposits. (437)

This quote indicates that these foreign rulers, and also the Ptolemaic pharaohs, likely saw no need to change the practice of using foundation deposits. The motivations behind these deposits obviously seemed beneficial to the new leaders and worth continuing. This idea would explain why there was no sudden change or break in the use of foundation deposits throughout ancient Egyptian history. Thus, because the motivation for using foundation deposits did not change drastically, neither did the contents. Ptolemaic and Egyptian pharaohs alike saw the importance of maintaining this tradition, and that is the reason why ancient Egyptian foundation deposits continued relatively unchanged for two thousand years.

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