POTTERY OFFERING TRAYS AND SOUL HOUSES: ESTABLISHING THE DIFFERENCE

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Abstract:

Traditionally, pottery offering trays and soul houses have been considered the same object type. In fact, many researchers support an established formal evolution of them, which states that there are three types of these artefacts: the first one consists of simple trays which might be accompanied by elements and/or offering models on its surface; the second group gathers trays that might show offering models together with a shelter model, and finally, the last type is characterised by building models in conjunction with other different elements and/or offering models.

However, it is possible to establish a difference that suggests an independent development of offering trays and soul houses, despite of their relationship. Thus, the goal of this paper is to review the main interpretations of offering trays and soul houses, and to offer an updated proposal, according to new research lines. For this purpose, the author will consider chronology as well as different features and locations.

Key words:

Pottery, offering tray, soul house, models, First Intermediate Period, Middle Kingdom.

Resumen:

Tradicionalmente, las bandejas de ofrendas de cerámica y las casas de almas se han considerado el mismo tipo de objeto. De hecho, muchos investigadores apoyan una evolución formal, según la cual existen tres tipos de estos artefactos. El primero consiste en simples bandejas que pueden ir acompañadas de elementos y/o modelos de ofrendas en su superficie. El segundo grupo sería similar al primero, pero también presenta un modelo de refugio. Finalmente, el último tipo se caracteriza por mostrar modelos arquitectónicos, así como otros elementos y/o modelos de ofrendas. Además, tanto bandejas como casas del alma, solían presentar un sistema de drenaje, que estaba directamente relacionado con el ritual de libación. La función de este ritual sería proporcionar mágicamente a los difuntos los elementos y/o modelos de ofrendas en las superficies y, en el caso de los modelos de refugios o modelos de edificios, también ofrecer refugio a los difuntos.

Sin embargo, es posible observar diferencias que sugieren un desarrollo independiente entre ambos tipos de objetos. Así pues, el objetivo de este artículo es revisar las principales interpretaciones de las bandejas de ofrendas y las casas de almas, para ofrecer una propuesta actualizada y según nuevas líneas de investigación. Para ello, el autor tendrá en cuenta la cronología, así como las diferentes características y lugares.

PALABRAS CLAVE:

Cerámica, bandeja de ofrendas, casa del alma, maquetas, Primer Periodo Intermedio, Reino Medio.

INTRODUCTION

The Egyptological tradition considers pottery offering trays and soul houses to be the same object. In fact, the latter is considered the final shape of offering trays in their formal evolution[1]. This evolution, which is widely accepted[2], reads as follows:

– Simple offering trays (Fig. 1a) show a wide range of shapes (rounded, quadrangular, oval, or horseshoe-shaped). In addition, models of food and drainage channels are usually present on their surface. Some offering trays would even show these channels alone because, according to Niwiński[3], libation became such an important process that it was sufficient to provide the deceased with their provisions.

Figure 1. (a) Rounded pottery offering tray with channels and food models. Deir el-Bahri. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, no. 28.3.210. Image of public domain. (b) Horseshoe-shaped pottery offering tray with a hut model, channels and offering models. Unprovenanced. Garstang Museum, no. 6355. Image courtesy of Luisa M. García González. (c) Soul house. Deir Rifeh. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, no. 07.231.10. Image of public domain.

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[1] PETRIE (1907: 15); VANDIER (1955: 976); NIWIŃSKI (1975: 85-93; 1984: 806-808).
[2] TAYLOR (2001: 107); LECLÈRE (2001: 120); MÜLLER and FOSTNER-MÜLLER (2015: 199); LEGROS (2016: 104), SOLCHAGA ECHEVARRÍA (2021: 447-448).
[3] NIWIŃSKI (1984: 811-812).

– Offering trays with a model of a hut (Fig. 1b) are similar to the above mentioned, only they show a model of a hut on their surface. Furthermore, this element may show a seat inside or stairs next to it.

– Soul houses, or offering trays with a hut, develop into a complete building model, which may also show a courtyard with offering models (Fig. 1c).

When it comes to the function of offering trays, they are traditionally considered substitutes for stone offering tables[4]; i.e., they would magically provide the deceased with food offerings by means of the libations[5]. Offering trays with a hut model and soul houses would also perform this function, but they signify a refuge to the deceased soul as well[6].

The general chronology of offering trays dates from the 9th to the 13th dynasties[7]. Even though some authors have associated the emergence of soul houses with the 12th dynasty, they do not dismiss an earlier presence of soul houses[8]. In fact, soul houses are said to have co-existed with simpler offering trays[9]. A recent manifestation of this was found in the tomb QH33, at the necropolis of Qubbet el-Hawa[10]. This rock-cut tomb dates from the late 12th dynasty, and it was reused during the 17th, 18th, 26th and 27th dynasties[11]. In this tomb, the Qubbet el-Hawa Project from the University of Jaén found several fragmented pottery offering trays[12], and other remarkable pottery fragments, being two of them of great importance. One of these sherds constitutes a headless terracotta human figurine with no arms (QH33/12/C1/UE176/T1984/inv.477). The other one, QH33/12/C21/UE171/T1842, is possibly a fragment of a door or a window from a serrated wall (Fig. 2a-b), which might belong to a soul house, according to parallel findings (Fig. 3a-b). These instances illustrate that offering trays and soul houses were chronologically simultaneous and might share the same location in some cases. Therefore, this might as well indicate that there is not a linear evolution in them.

The usual location of offering trays and soul houses is the funerary space. However, simple offering trays have also been found in urban or domestic contexts[13]. In contrast, soul houses have only been found in funerary contexts, except in Buhen, whose finding confused its discoverers. According to them, this could be explained by the fact that these artefacts might have been taken from the cemetery there[14]. When it

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[4] NIWIŃSKI (1984: 806).

[5] PETRIE (1907: 15); KILIAN (2016: 174); LEGROS (2016: 90).

[6] NIWIŃSKI (1984: 806-813).

[7] PETRIE (1900: 26); MOND and MYERS (1937: 22); SLATER (1874: 311); MINAULT-GOUT (1980: 277); VERCOUTTER (1980: 372); LECLÈRE (2001: 120); KILIAN (2012: 110); MI (2020: 97).

[8] VANDIER (1955: 976); LECLÈRE (2001: 120); ARNOLD (2005: 31-32); MI (2021: 53).

[9] MI (2021: 53).

[10] JIMÉNEZ-SERRANO (2015: 169-175).

[11] DE LA TORRE-ROBLES (2019).

[12] For more information about it, see LECHUGA-IBÁÑEZ (2021: 127-136).

[13] PETRIE (1891); DUNHAM (1967: 55, 160); EMERY, SMITH, and MILLARD (1979: 151); LAUFFRAY (1980: 47-48); SMITH (2003: 128-129); CZERNY (2015: 352-354).

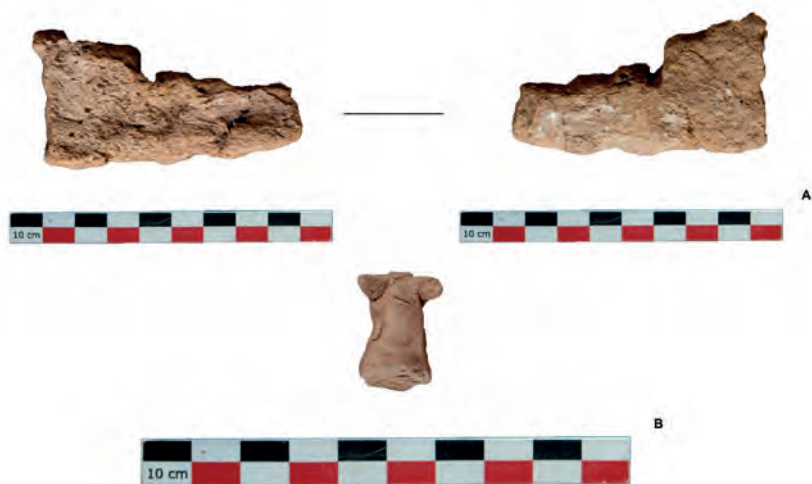[14] EMERY, SMITH, and MILLARD (1979: p. 98, pls. 55, and 104).

Figure 2. (a) Fragment of possible soul house QH33/12/C21/UE171/T1842. QH33. Qubbet el-Hawa. Image of the author, © Qubbet el-Hawa Project. (b) Anthropomorphic figurine that might belong to a soul house QH33/12/C1/UE176/T1984/inv.477. QH33. Qubbet el-Hawa. Image of the author, © Qubbet el-Hawa Project

Figure 3. Clay fragment of a serrated wall. Image of the author, courtesy of the Petrie Museum of Egyptian and Sudanese Archaeology, UCL.

comes to the necropolis, offering trays were placed in public areas[15] of tombs; specifically, in funerary chapels[16] or courtyards[17]. However, some other examples have been

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[15] SLATER (1974: 311).
[16] CHASSINAT and PALANQUE (1911: 164).
[17] EDEL (2008: 1192, 1288, 1292).

found inside shafts[18] or burial chambers[19]. And both cast a doubt on their original location. As a matter of fact, these places seem to be secondary contexts due to the plundering and/or reusing of the tombs[20].

Furthermore, soul houses have been found at the same places as offering trays; namely, the public areas of tombs and also in shafts. However, it is worth mentioning that some examples were found close to the deceased in an intact chamber[21]. And, on these occasions, soul houses appeared together with other objects considered of high status[22], which ultimately indicates that the raw material of soul houses is not synonym of low-status ownership.

Previous findings of offering trays and soul houses

Petrie and Quibell named offering trays with domestic architectonical elements «soul houses» in 1896[23]. They considered these artefacts to be a survival of foreign customs belonging to human groups from Central Africa or to some other external influence[24]. However, these ideas were abandoned after confirming the native origin of soul houses[25]. The largest group of offering trays and soul houses was found in Deir Rifeh by Petrie (1907), when the aforementioned evolution found its origin.

On the other hand, not only should the building models found in the Predynastic Period[26] (Fig. 4) be taken into account, but also the ones after the 13th dynasty, that is

Figure 4. Clay house model found at El-Amrah.
Image of Randall-Maciver and Mace (1902, pl. 10).

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[18] Edel (2008: 1762-1789); Lechuga-Ibáñez (2022: 129).
[19] Kilian (2016: 174).
[20] Michalowski (1938: 184; 1950: 67, 82, 84); Slater (1974: 311); Ryan (1988: 37).
[21] Capart (1927: 48); Peet and Loat (1913: 24).
[22] Ryan (1988: 65, 80).
[23] Petrie (1896: 42).
[24] Petrie (1896: 42; 1914: 127).
[25] Niwiński (1997: 42).
[26] Randall-Maciver and Mace (1902, 42); Stadelmann (1977: 1067); Hassan (1988: 155); Bard (2005: 27).

those building models dated in Greco-Roman Period[27] (Fig. 5a-c). In fact, some building models have been found in other cultures[28] (Fig. 6a-b).

Figure 5. (a) Stone building model. Greco-Roman Period. Image based on Azara (1997, p. 174). (b) Stone building model. Greco-Roman Period. Image based on Azara (1997, p. 175). (c) Pottery house models. Contemporary Era. Image based on Petrie (1909, pl. 53).
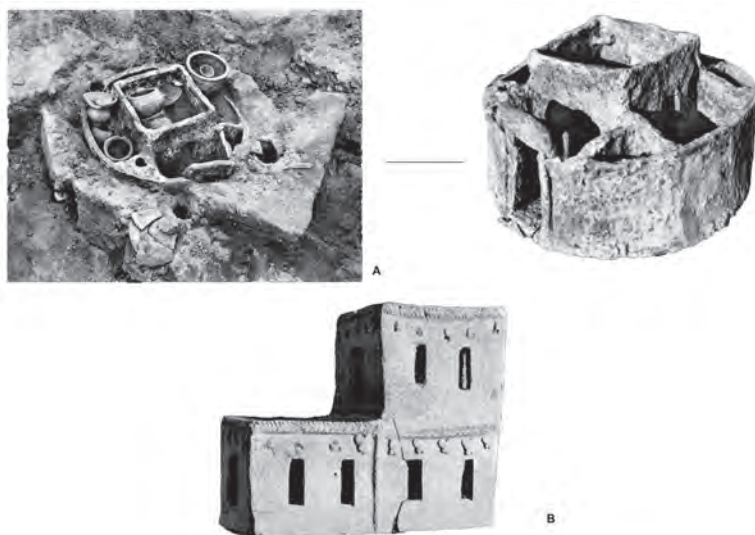

Figure 6. (a) Rounded clay building model. Early Dynastic Period. Mari, Tell Hariri, Mesopotamia. Image based on Parrot (1955, pl. 15). (b) Babylonian Spirit House made of clay. Old Assyrian Period, Mesopotamia. Image based on Parrot (1955, 193, Figure 4).

[27] Marouard (2014: 117-118, fig. 8). To know about their representation, see Marchi (2014: 91-93, fig. 7)
[28] Parrot (1955: 185-211).

Elements and models on offering trays and soul houses

Offering trays and soul houses do share features, but there is a clear difference: the presence of a building model on soul houses. Listed below, there are several elements that both artefacts share:

- 1st group. Food, vessels, and furniture models.
- 2nd group. Basins, spouts, and channels.
- 3rd group. Garden models, tools, holes, and anthropomorphic figures.

Concerning the first group, food models are similar to one another. When it comes to vessel models, *ḥs*-vases, bowls and jars prevail on offering trays[29], whereas on soul houses, it is large jars and stands that predominate. With regard to furniture models, seats are more characteristic than tables or beds, but the latter are only present in soul houses.

Regarding the second group, basins predominate on soul houses, while channels are more limited. On the contrary, channels have more presence on offering trays and show different designs. Some researchers suggest that basins might represent lake models or ornamental gardens that would provide the deceased with a pleasure spot[30]. On the other hand, channels, basins, and even the internal walls of some offering trays might symbolize agricultural fields or irrigation systems[31]. As for spouts, they are present in both offering trays and soul houses, though mainly in a quadrangular shape.

Lastly, the third group, which includes garden models on soul houses (Fig. 7a-b). These are similar to the funerary garden found in Dra Abu el-Naga by the Djehuty Project[32], or the one found by Winlock and re-excavated by the Middle Kingdom Theban Project[33]. In addition, there are hand-mill models and small holes around the edge or basins on offering trays and soul houses too. These holes would be meant to place ornamental vegetal items or a canopy, aimed at providing the deceased with decoration or shade, as in Meketre's house model[34] (Fig. 8a). Finally, and with reference to human figures, two types shall be distinguished: hieratic figures, which predominate on offering trays; and dynamic figures, meaning figures performing some activity such as grinding grain or carrying jars (Fig. 9), which are mainly present on soul houses. It is also possible to find seating figures on soul houses, which would represent the deceased, as shown in the wooden models in fig. 8b. Therefore, the hieratic figures would represent the deceased[35], but the dynamic figures on soul houses remind us of the wooden workshop models.

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[29] Mi (2020: 94-121).
[30] Legros (2016: 92); Slater (1974: 304).
[31] Kuentz (1981: 248-255); Solchaga (2020).
[32] Galán and García (2019).
[33] Morales, *et al.* (2018: 214).
[34] Petrie (1907); Kuentz (1981); Hugonot (1989: 194); Leclère (2001: 99-121); Taylor (2001: 106-107).
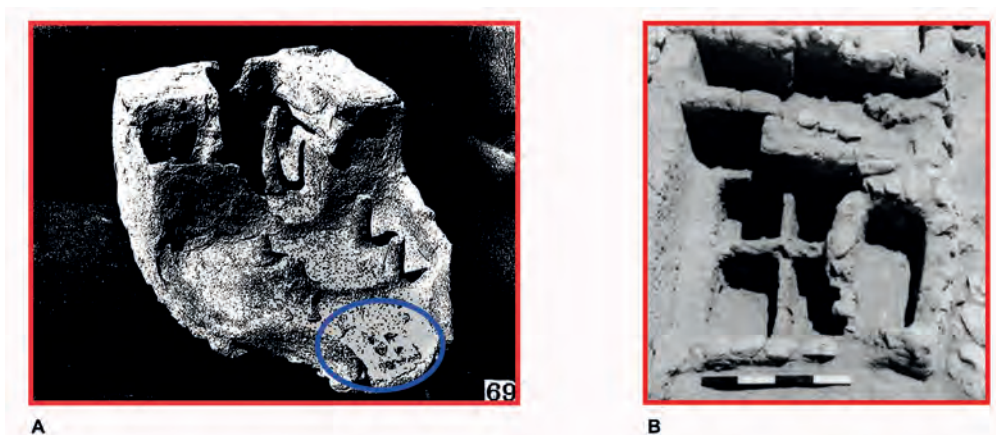[35] Leclère (2001: 112).

Figure 7. (a) Soul house with a garden model. Deir Rifeh. Image of PETRIE (1907: pl. 17a). (b) Artificial garden with growing plots. Main Chapel from the Amarna workmen's village. Image based on KEMP (1987: pl. 4, Figure 1).
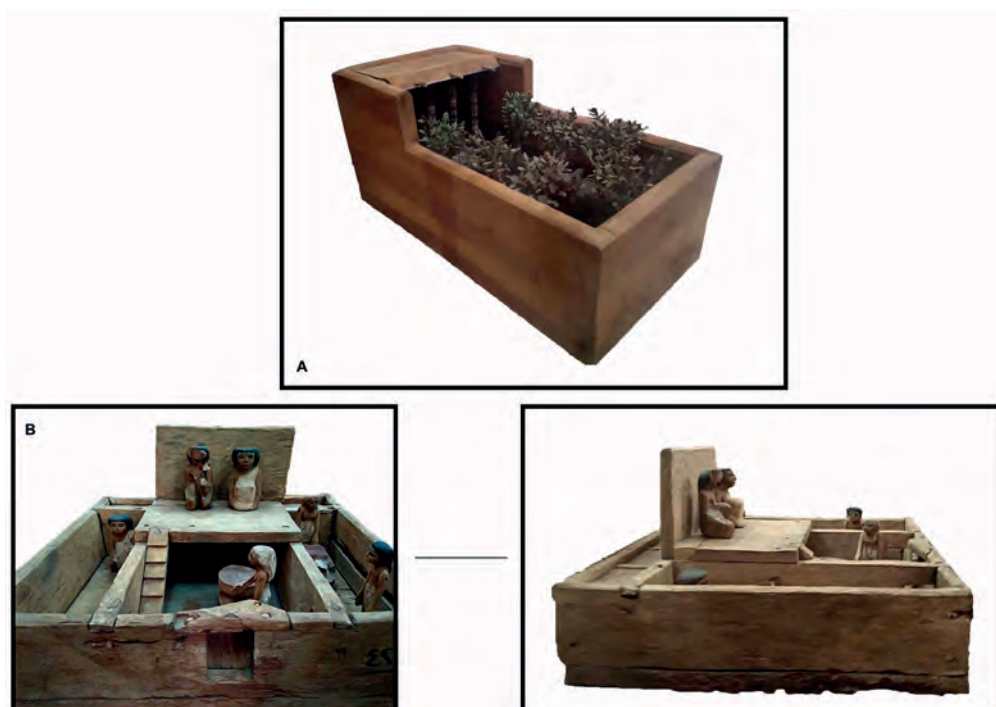

Figure 8. (a) Meketre's wooden house model. Middle Kingdom. Thebes. Egyptian Museum (Cairo), no. JE 46721. Image of the author. (b) Wooden house model. Middle Kingdom. Unknown origin. Malawi Museum (Minya). Unknown register number. Image of the author.

Figure 9. (a) Human figure seating which belonged to soul house. No. UC38987, Petrie Museum. Image of the author, courtesy of the Petrie Museum of Egyptian and Sudanese Archaeology, UCL. (b) human figure grinding which belonged to soul house. No. UC38773, Petrie Museum. Image of the author, courtesy of the Petrie Museum of Egyptian and Sudanese Archaeology, UCL.

ARCHITECTURAL ELEMENTS

As stated in the introduction, soul houses present a building model, whereas offering trays do not. However, there is an intermediate group of offering trays showing a hut model and that would imply a transition between simpler offering trays and soul houses. These intermediate offering trays differ substantially from soul houses and their elements. In fact, they resemble the simpler trays. When comparing these intermediate models with actual shrines[36], it is possible to identify some similarities (Fig. 10a-b). By way of illustration, the presence of a hieratic human figure, which reminds us of private shrines, precisely. Another similar element to this intermediate type of offering trays is simple trays showing a block model, which is usually identified as a seat[37]. However, if we compare it to some domestic shrine or altar, they bear much of a resemblance as well (Fig. 11a-b). The interpretation of these elements in offering trays as shrine or altar models in this study, would be reinforced with the idea that support offering trays would be the representation of a space where all cult activities could be performed[38]. Another idea about the interpretation, in this case soul houses, was proposed by Solchaga Echevarría, who maintains that soul houses represent the ritual space in the domestic context[39.]

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[36] Arnold (2005: 32); Mi (2020: 72). Solchaga Echevarría (2021: 447-448).
[37] Solchaga Echevarría (2021: 259-266, 448).
[38] Lechuga Ibáñez and García González (Forthcoming).
[39] Solchaga Echevarría (2021: 449).

Figure 10. (a) Pottery horseshoe-shaped offering tray with a shrine model, channels, and some offering models. Unknown origin. Garstang Museum, no. 6355. Image of Luisa García González. (b) Cult shrines of Heqaib (deified) and Sarenput I. Heqaib´s cultic funerary complex, Elephantine (Aswan). Image of the author. (c) Cult shrine of Sarenput II. QH31 tomb. Qubbet el-Hawa (Aswan). Image of the author.

On the other hand, soul houses show a complete architectural or building-like structure, which can also be noticed in regular houses or tombs. By way of illustration, these regular tombs usually show domestic architecture due to the fact that they were considered the eternity house[40]. Likewise, and since soul houses were considered representations of tombs[41], the earlier mentioned architectural structure shares the same purpose.

However, there is an element that is present in both soul houses and offering trays with shrine models: a stairway. In order to understand its presence, we must review Pyramid and Coffin texts, concretely PT267 365, which narrates the ascent of the deceased to the sky[42]:

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[40] Lacovara and Teasley (2001); Kanawati (2001); Leclère (2001).
[41] Lundius (2020: 89).
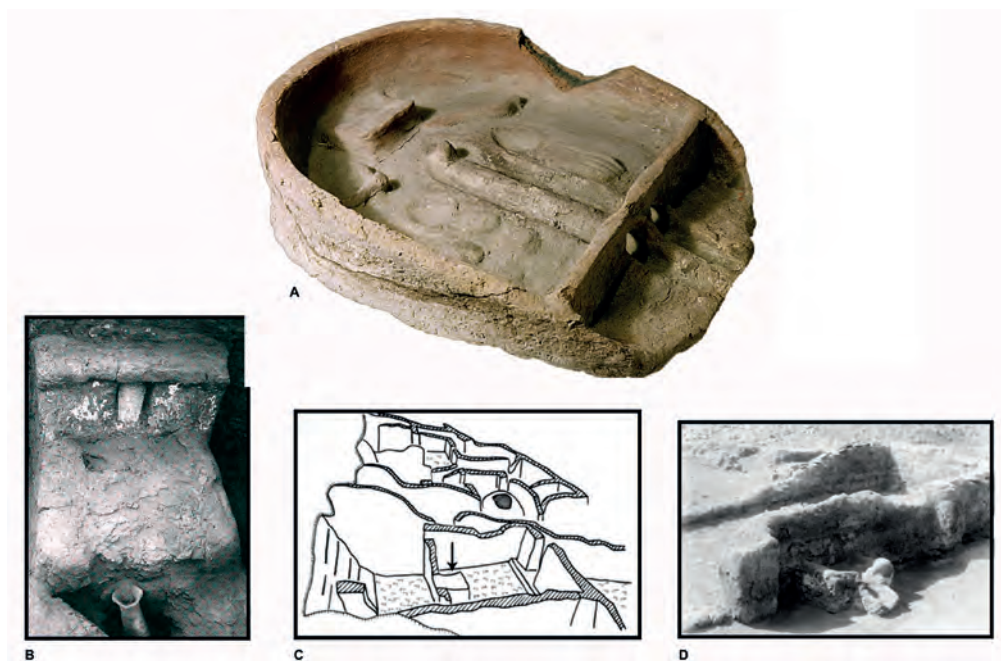[42] Sethe (1908: 190); Allen (2006: 281); Popielska-Grzybowska (2015: 89).

Figure 11. (a) Offering tray showing an internal wall with two drainage holes, channels, offering models, and a quadrangular block. Dendera. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, no. 98.4.40. Image of public Domain. (b) Household shrine inside a house at Askut fortress. Middle Kingdom. Image based on Smith (2003: 129, Figure 5.26). (c) Possible mud-brick altar in a house at Lisht. Around the 13th dynasty. Image based on Stevens (2009: 4, Figure 2). (d) Domestic altar in the house P46.24 at el-Amarna. Image based on Stevens (2009: 4, Figure 3).

Transcription, transliteration, and translation of PT 267, *Pyr*. 365a-b in the Unis' pyramid according to Allen (2013) and Piankoff (1968: 40, pl. 25).

sk̲.t n.f tꜣ rdw r pt pr.f jm r pt prr.f ḥr ḥtj n jdt wrt (…)

The earth is beaten into steps for him towards heaven that he may mount on it towards heaven (…)

Therefore, the stairway would have the following symbolism: to allow the ascent of the deceased to the afterlife. In the case of soul houses, its main purpose would be that of completing the building models.

DISCUSSION

In view of the above arguments, it could be stated that offering trays and soul houses share a variety of attributes, but differ on some others. One similarity worth mentioning is the treatment of their surface, which could be explained by the ritualistic or magical function both artefacts perform. And their raw material is the same as well. However, this applies to other objects whose raw material is clay too; namely, granary, tomb, or food models, shabtis, etc. (Fig. 12). This is, most probably, due to the symbolism ascribed to clay, i.e., being the essence of the earth and the Nile, and thus, associated with fertility and regeneration. Moreover, its initial fragility and subsequent hardness after firing suggest a transition from life to death[43]. Therefore, there are different models made of different materials: stone, wood, or clay; and among these models, there are house models (figs. 5a-b, 8a-b). As a result, it can be concluded that soul houses are not an evolution of offering trays, but rather they belong to the same religious and magical sphere. The main difference between offering trays and soul houses is the presence of a complex architectural structure. Furthermore, offering models on offering trays' surfaces predominate over any other element, whereas in soul houses, it is the architectural model which does. Taking the above into consideration, two different groups of artefacts could be established: on the one hand, the one which comprises simple offering trays and offering trays with a shrine model; and on the other hand, the one comprising soul houses.

Another detail that distances offering trays and soul houses is chronology. Whereas offering trays (with shrine models or not) are present in Egypt between the 9th dynasty and 13th dynasty, building models are found in the Predynastic Period, and it is also possible to find them in other Egyptian historical periods. In addition, building models are found in other cultures as well, which suggests that building models are artefacts with a large territorial area. However, in the case of Egypt, these models would be influenced by other artefacts and rituals, similar to the presence of offering models in soul houses. Nevertheless, the presence of these offering models in soul houses has been interpreted according to Spence (2011) as:

> (…) the representation of the offerings in the courtyard of each soul house may also serve as a reminder of the role of the household in provisioning the tombs of deceased relatives and in carrying out the ritual activity associated with offering (p. 908).

When it comes down to the location of offering trays and soul houses, the former are predominantly present in domestic contexts, as opposed to the latter, which have been found in one archaeological site only. Furthermore, not only have offering trays been found in the public area of tombs, but also in shafts and chambers notwithstanding the fact that these last places were altered contexts due to plundering and reuses. On the contrary, soul houses have been found in intact chambers[44], which are precisely the placement of wood models as well. Moreover, the presence of offering

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[43] RAVEN (1988: 240-241).
[44] CAPART (1927: 48); PEET and LOAT (1913: 24).

trays and soul houses in the same archaeological context shows a coexistence of both artefacts, and this might indicate a different functionality.

It must also be acknowledged that sets of offering trays dedicated to the same deceased person have been found[45], whereas soul houses are found individually[46].

Conclusions

In view of all the aforementioned arguments, an independent development of offering trays and soul houses could be implied, resembling the one of offering trays and stone offering tables[47]. Some examples of these artefacts, namely stone offering tables, pottery offering trays and soul houses share features with one another, such as spouts, offerings models or the presence of stairs. However, these are mainly due to their religious context.

In addition, the correct term to use for soul houses after carrying out this research should be «building models», which are influenced by offering trays during the Middle Kingdom. For these reasons, it can be suggested that there is not an evolution of offering trays as such, but rather, a coexistence of two different types of objects during a period of time:

– Simple offering trays (with offering models, shrine or altar models, or without them).
– Building models (with complex architectural structures).

In conclusion, the function of building models would be to provide the deceased with various items, spaces, and activities depicted on them, such as wooden models. Thus, offering trays and building models would not be similar, because building models would be part of the burial moment, intended for the benefit of the deceased in the afterlife. In contrast, offering trays are votive objects used in rituals conducted after the burial, intended mainly for the benefit of the living[48]. This is evident from their frequent presence in places of worship[49], where sets of these artefacts have been found.

Acknowledgements

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[45] Lechuga-Ibáñez (2019a: 53-54).
[46] Petrie (1907).
[47] Kilian (2012: 112); Lechuga-Ibáñez (2019b: 198); Mi (2020: 96).
[48] For more information see Lechuga-Ibáñez (in press)
[49] Edel (2008: 1189-96, 1288). See also Lechuga-Ibáñez (in press).

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