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Deir El-Naqlun 1992 : The Pottery

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DEIR EL-NAQLUN 1992: THE POTTERY

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The pottery discovered in the 1992 season came from two places: site B (northward extension of a trench dug in earlier years), and site D (debris filling rooms D.11-D.15). The pottery assemblages from sites B and D are chronologically and typologically different and will therefore be discussed separately.

Sector B

The clear stratigraphy of trench B indicates two phases in the accumulation of this part of the kom. In the first phase, the gently falling slope here was used for a refuse dump; the rubbish was quite varied in contents, from *sebakh* and food leftovers to rope, basketry, textiles, wood, papyrus and pottery. The surface of the rubbish layer was uneven and necessitated leveling when the site came into use again later on. The dump was covered with several layers of earth containing ashes and large quantities of potsherds, added presumably to make these layers harder.

In stratigraphic terms, the pottery from this site falls into two distinct groups: the refuse dump assemblage and the leveling layer group.

In the refuse dump, almost all categories of pottery are represented, both in the typological and the functional sense (table and cooking wares). Domestic wares are definitely in the majority, with such shapes as buckets, bowls of all kinds and sizes, amphorae and cooking pots predominating. Tableware is represented almost exclusively by Egyptian products, most of them made of Nile silt (imitations of North African forms

Hayes 83, 84, 91, 103 and Hayes form 3 from Asia Minor). Painted pottery is a rarity and is usually characterized by a simple decoration consisting of semicircular arcades, almost exclusively adorning carinated bowls. The only figural motif is in the decoration of a storage jar painted in a rather primitive fashion on the shoulders (max. dia. 40-60 cm) (Fig. 1); the motif consisted of two birds (peacocks ?) presented antithetically, facing a Greek cross.

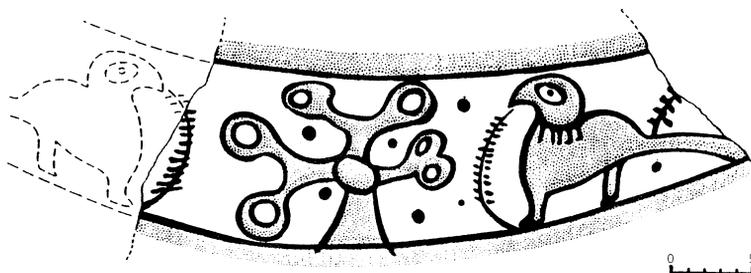


Fig. 1. Motif of birds adorning a Greek cross painted on a storage vessel from site B (all drawings by the author).

Three forms have been identified at Naqlun for the first time. A clay pail (Fig. 2) is semicircular with a strongly out-turned rim and a wide semicircular handle attached to the upper edges. The shoulders of the vessel were decorated with white intersecting garlands, and there were white dots on the handle. The pail was presumably used to carry some kind of oily substance to judge by the numerous dark stains on the outside.

Another unknown form is a clay funnel (Fig. 3). Its bottom part was made into a projecting collar, which permitted it to be

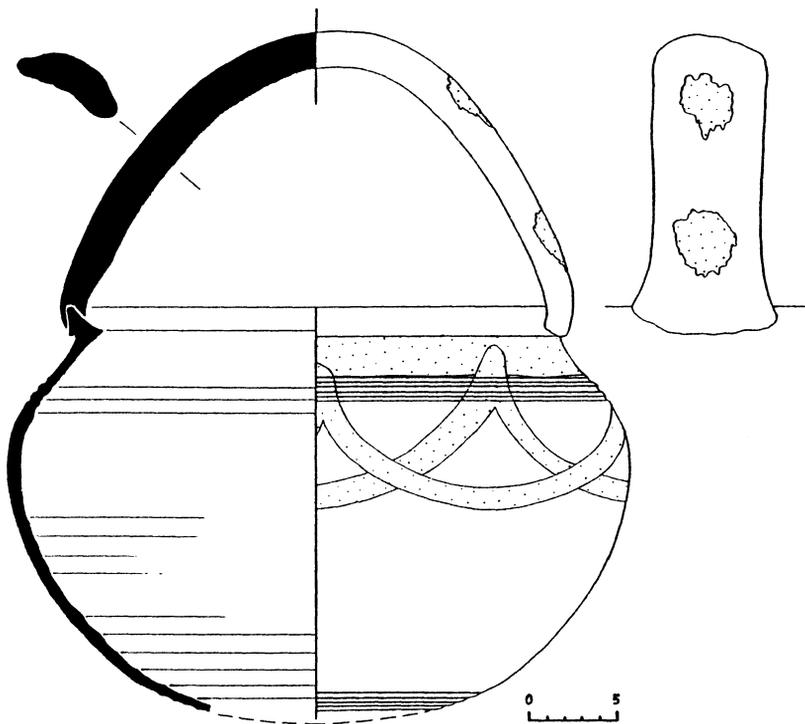


Fig. 2. Pail from site B.

positioned on the neck of the vessel which was being filled. Just below the upper edge there are two openings arranged horizontally, presumably for threading a rope to hang the vessel by (above the vessel to be filled for instance?). The upper edge of the funnel was decorated with a series of white spots on a dark navy blue background.

Finally, there are three low cups or supports, two of which were handmade and one turned on the wheel.

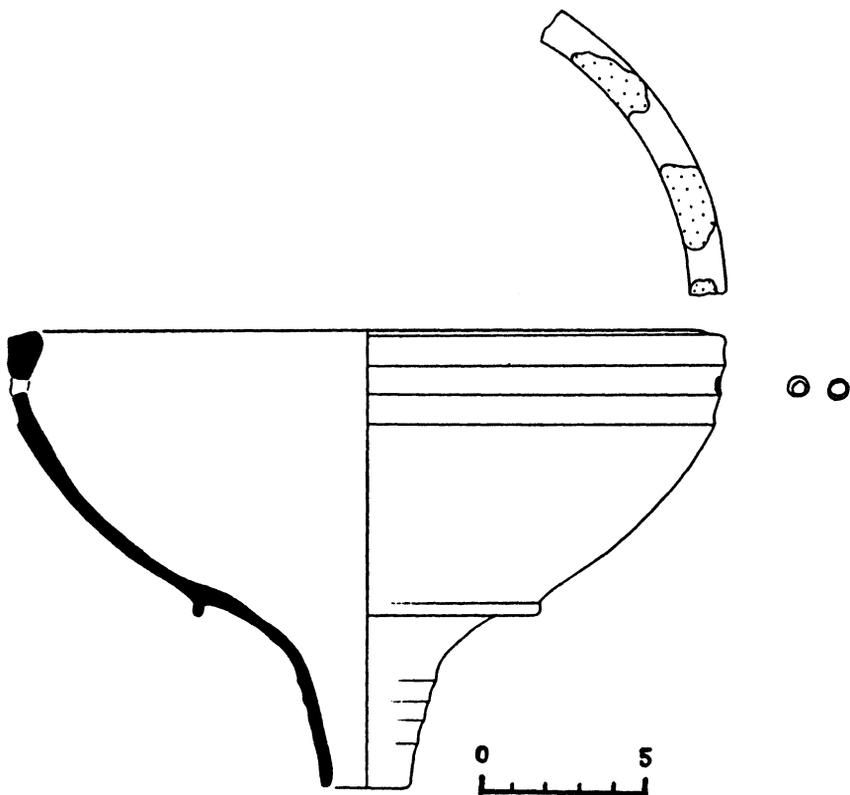


Fig. 3. Clay funnel from site B.

Beside a large quantity of vessels in different states of preservation and countless sherds, two deposits of brown amphorae (Late Roman 7) were discovered in the northern part of the trench explored this season. In both cases the amphorae were stacked horizontally in two to five layers, as if to create a construction of some kind or a "partition". The first of the two de-

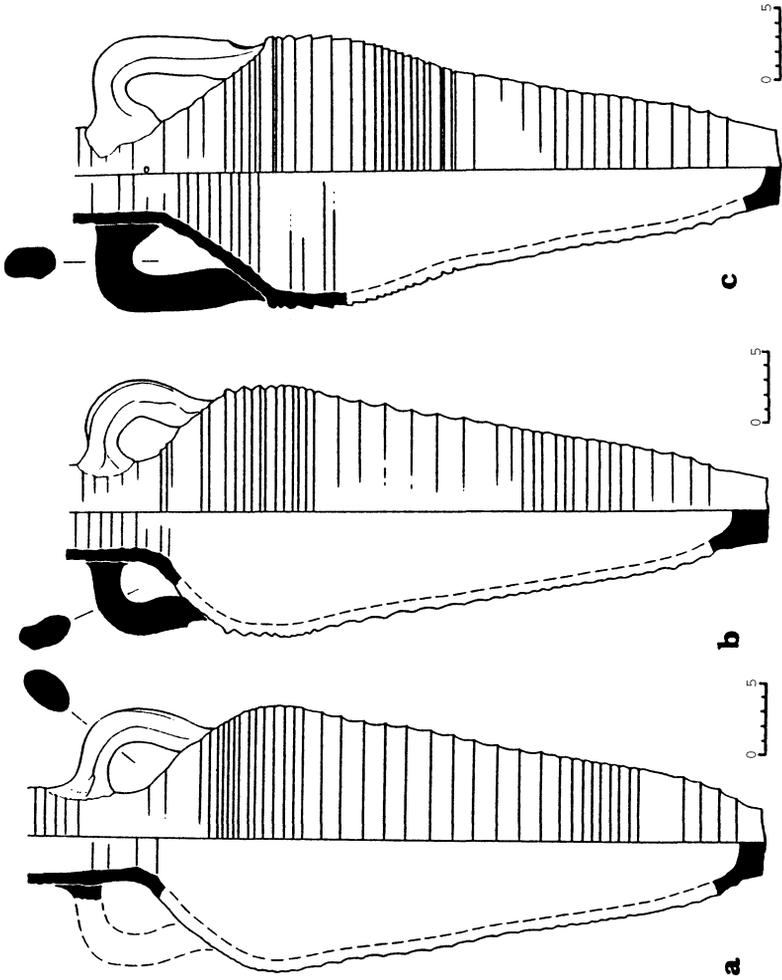


Fig. 4. Three variants of shapes of brown amphorae from deposits at site B.

posits was situated latitudinally and continued into the baulks of the trench to the east and west of sector B. The second deposit ran longitudinally and disappeared under the northern baulk. So far a total of 106 brown amphorae has been discovered. Morphologically very similar, the amphorae can nevertheless be divided into three groups, each of which represents a different variant (Fig. 4 a-c). On the shoulders of two amphorae there are short, one-word inscriptions painted in black; their meaning has not been explained yet.

At present it is difficult to determine why the amphorae had been stacked the way they were, after they had stopped serving their original function. Perhaps this was so that they could be easily taken and reused when the need came, not necessarily for transporting liquids but as elements of the structure of walls, partitions or barriers. There are many examples of such constructions consisting of amphorae placed alternately neck and bottom up, and bonded with clay sealing the spaces in between.

An interesting find is the set of sherds belonging to several amphorae of the LR 1 type with traces of secondary use. This is indicated by the traces of a sealing substance on the inside and evidence of repairs. The reason for this was the bad quality of the amphorae which had to be, before they were used again, sealed in all the places where cracking and holes had appeared due to the presence of large lime grits in the clay which with time exploded the vessel walls from within. In order to make the vessels hold water again, their inside surfaces were sealed and the holes were filled with a grey substance recalling gypsum. While secondary impregnation of amphorae is a frequent phenomenon, the filling of holes in the vessels' body has been recorded at Naqlun for the first time.

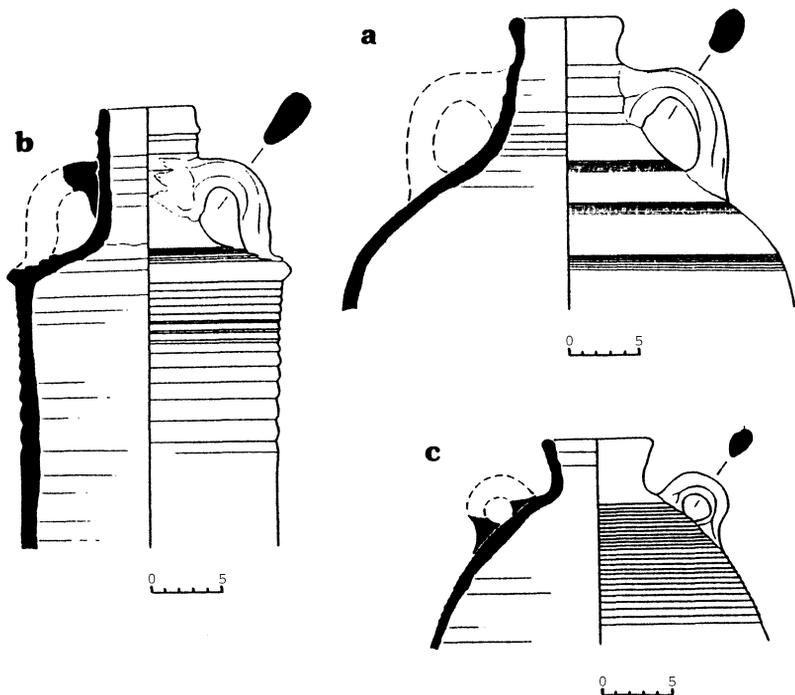


Fig. 5. Amphorae fragments from the leveling layers on site B.

The chronology of the rubbish dump layers has not been established satisfactorily. Although the successive layers were formed during a few to several years, their ceramic content does not appear to be chronologically homogeneous, suggesting that the refuse dump as a whole should be dated more broadly. At the present stage of research all that can be said is that the pottery from this sector originates from the late 6th to the second half of the 7th century AD.

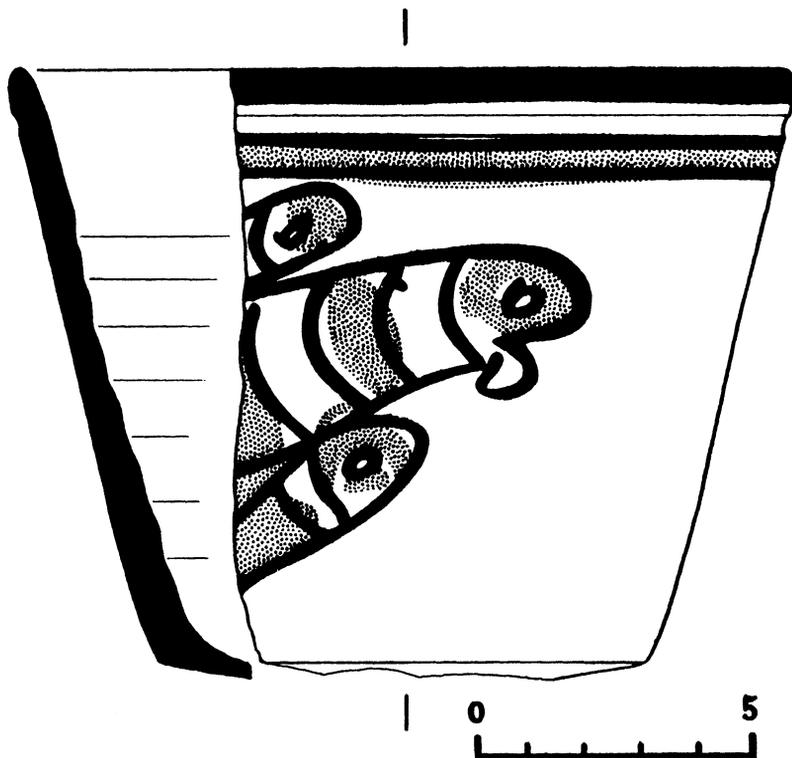


Fig. 6. Cup of Upper Egyptian type with painted decoration of flying bird, sector D.

The pottery in the leveling layer above the rubbish dump indicates that the leveling occurred some 200 to 300 years after the dump had formed. Rare sherds of a glazed pottery dated to the 9th-10th century are proof of this. This pottery which is the latest in this assemblage presumably indicates when the leveling took place in order to prepare the area under the next habitation.

However, it would seem that the leveling was done using an earlier deposit (earth and ashes mixed with pottery), perhaps from the 8th or possibly 9th century. The main constituent of this level is a domestic ware, mainly thick-walled cooking pots and amphorae of three types:

1. Amphorae imitating the Mediterranean type Late Roman 2 with a slightly conical neck and shoulders decorated with a kind of comb ornament, produced most probably in Egypt (Fig. 5a);
2. Late variants of Egyptian brown amphorae (Late Roman 7) with short necks and rather flat shoulders separated by a ledge from the wide, almost cylindrical body in its upper end (Fig. 5b);
3. Bag-shaped amphorae (sherds) with short flaring necks and loop handles attached to the shoulders (Fig. 5c).

In the way of tableware, the leveling layers yielded mainly Aswan products imitating Late Roman form Hayes 3 from Asia Minor.

An unique pottery find are two sherds of amphorae produced at Aswan, with images of fish grooved on their shoulders before firing.

It should be assumed that although the leveling layer was formed most probably in the 10th-11th century, the absolute majority of the pottery found in it comes from an earlier period, the 8th and 9th centuries AD, and was mixed with the leveling fill years after it had gone out of use.

SECTOR D (D.H-D.15)

The pottery from site D was found in the rubble filling the rooms D.11-D.15. Its presence here is accidental to judge by the degree of destruction, and it originally did not belong to these rooms. As in the case of pottery from site B, the pottery here is

mostly of a domestic type. The rare tableware sherds include primarily Aswan products (mostly Hayes 91), but also plates of Nile silt without distinguished rim which seem to have been inspired by some more or less unspecified forms of Late Roman pottery. The pottery from Upper Egypt is represented by two pieces: a cup decorated at its widest point with pairs of red and black dots on a cream slip and a conical cup (a chalice) decorated in the same colors, depicting a flying bird (Fig. 6). An interesting sherd with decoration is the upper part of a large storage jar on which birds are shown. Analogous vessels are on display in the Coptic Museum in Cairo; they are biconical, on a ring base, with four handles set at equal intervals around the maximum diameter. The decoration on these vessels includes fish and other animals beside birds.

An interesting group are fragments of plates with bowls made of Nile silt. Most of them are unfortunately very small fragments. Two of the plates could be reconstructed sufficiently to permit the shape to be recorded (Fig. 7). On each of the plates there was a central larger depression around which there were four additional bowl-like depressions; of these just one was preserved in each case. All the sherds of this type are covered with a light slip (beige or white), while some fragments are further decorated with brown or red paint. These plates do not form a homogeneous group; the clay is different, as is the color of the slip and the form of the rim. All this would suggest that the plates are not morphologically homogeneous and that they need not have been created at one time or in one workshop. Perhaps when compared with fragments of composite vessels discovered at Naqlun, it will be possible to

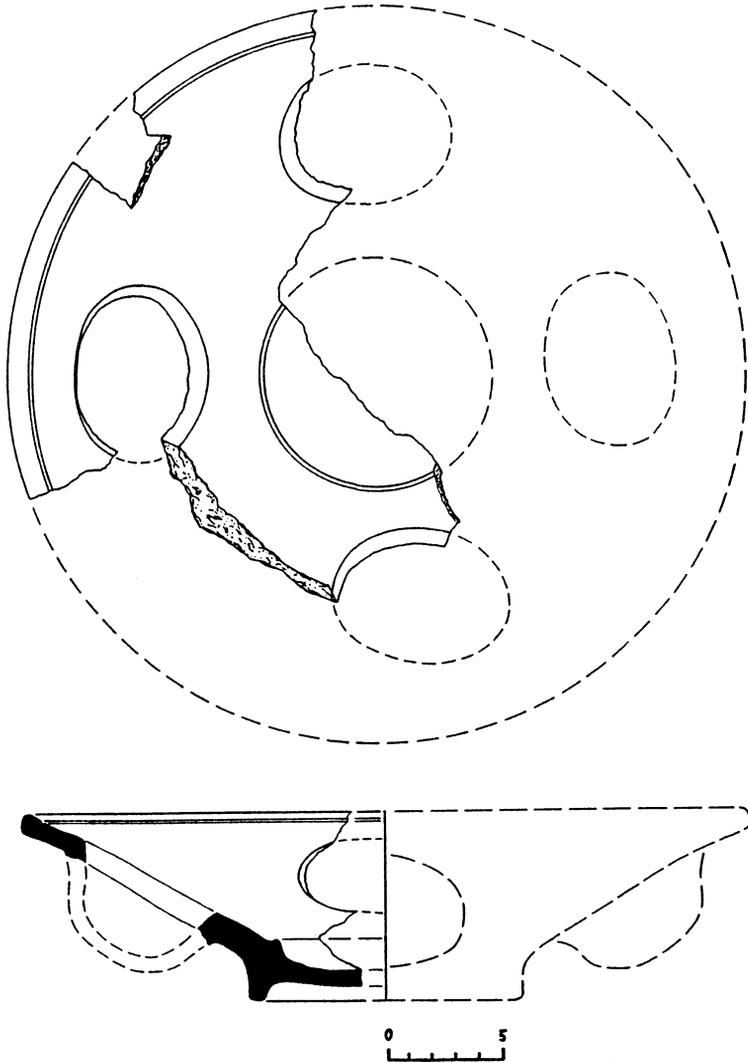


Fig. 7. Composite vessel found in sector D.

draw closer to an explanation for the purpose of these vessels, which are rarely found in Egypt.

Relatively few amphorae were found in rooms D.11-D.15. These are mostly small sherds of brown amphorae. Globular amphorae are much more characteristic for the fill here; similarly as in the leveling layers at site B, bag-shaped amphorae occur side by side with amphorae whose form and combed decoration refer to the Late Roman 2 amphorae as the prototype.

Glazed sherds and Ayyubid coins date the pottery found in the fill of rooms D.11-D.15 to the 9th-12th century.