

A Duck-shaped Vessel from Egypt or the Middle East – almost 4000 years old



In 1883 the 30-year-old Flinders Petrie, later to become known as ‘The Father of Egyptian Archaeology’, was exploring the Nile delta by boat. He spotted a mound called Tell el-Yahudia (sometimes spelled Yahudiah or Yahudieh) which he noted would be a likely site for excavation. It was over twenty years before he returned to carry out an excavation and when he did he discovered a unique type of pottery, decorated with designs incised and pricked with a comb-like tool. Since then this style of pottery has been found by archaeologists in other parts of Egypt, Sudan, Israel, Lebanon, Jordan and Cyprus. It was first made around 1800 BC, with a peak in production between 1680 and 1530 BC, and archaeologists in the region have found it a useful marker to help date a site to this period.

The most common form of Tell el-Yahudia pottery are small jugs, made in a range of shapes and decorations, but they also made vessels shaped like people, fruit and animals – especially fish and birds. The piece (30 cm long) in the photo above is a duck-shaped vessel, where the back and tail form the lid, with two compartments inside.



In ancient times, in the Middle East, towns gradually developed into large mounds, as the mud-brick buildings collapsed or were demolished and the debris was spread out to construct new buildings on. At Tell el-Yahudia there are two mounds. The smaller one dates from Roman times and contains the remains of a large Jewish temple, said to have been built in imitation of the temple in Jerusalem by an exiled priest. This explains the name of the place, as Tell el-Yahudia means hill of the Jews. However, the characteristic pottery was found in the other mound, which is larger and was a living town 1500 years before the Romans. This places it at an interesting time in Egyptian history. You may be aware that the first two thousand years of the civilization of Ancient Egypt is divided by historians into three periods – the Old Kingdom, Middle Kingdom and New Kingdom. These Kingdoms were separated by brief (up to 100 years) periods of instability, when centralised government broke down. The larger mound at Tell el-Yahudia dates from the intermediate period between the Middle Kingdom and the New Kingdom. During that period, for the first time in the history of Egypt, part of the country was ruled by foreigners – the Hyksos (the name derives from the Egyptian term for ‘foreign rulers’). According to later Egyptian historians the Hyksos were violent and bloodthirsty invaders, but there is some suggestion that this may be history as written by the final victors and that in fact most of the foreigners living in northern Egypt at that time may have been peaceful settlers.

The Hyksos ruled over the northern part of Egypt, governing from a city in the Nile delta, which is where Tell el-Yahudia is located. In fact it has been suggested that the style of pottery found at Tell el-Yahudia may have originated in the Hyksos homelands, somewhere in the lands around the eastern Mediterranean. However, analysis of the clay bodies has shown that once they had settled in Egypt that is where most of this pottery was made. The fact that it is now found by archaeologists over a wide area of the eastern Mediterranean shows what a lot of trade there was in that area, even in those unsettled times.

It looks as if my duck vessel was made by pressing sheets of clay into shaped moulds. Once the shapes for the body and lid had stiffened, the tail, neck and feet would have been added. There is evidence of a vertical join between the head and the neck, which suggests that the head was also formed separately by pressing clay into a carved mould. This makes sense as it would have allowed many copies of this piece of detailed modelling to be made quickly.



The lid has been decorated with a design of inscribed lines. Two techniques have been used - the upright tail and two areas either side of the tail have a geometric design of lines inscribed using a

sharp tool (see photo on left below), and the front half of the back has a more irregular crosshatch pattern. It appears that the lines of this crosshatch pattern were not inscribed, but rather impressed using a flat tool with a sharp edge with a row of needle-like points. This is very typical of this type of pottery – on other examples the holes made by the points can be more pronounced, but it looks as if the potter making my bird had a rather worn tool and the points generally just produced very fine-scale irregularities in the lines (see photo on right below).



On some examples of this type of pottery the incised design has been enhanced by inlaying a white substance in the grooves and holes. One report I have read says this substance was calcium carbonate (i.e. chalk). This has been done on my vessel - many of the lines appear whitened, and there are white patches elsewhere on the surface where it has not been wiped off fully.

Where it has not been whitened in this way the surface of my duck varies in colour from buff to black. The blackened areas were almost certainly caused by smoke during the firing. However, the larger compartment inside the vessel has been coated with a black slip and the well-defined but irregular boundary between the black slip and the uncoated clay can be clearly seen (see below). I can't help feeling that this black slip had a functional purpose, maybe related to the intended contents of the vessel, but I'm not clear what this would have been. I'm inclined to think it contained some sort of cosmetic – there are other examples of duck-shaped cosmetic containers from ancient Egypt. It is said that ducks were considered a symbol of fertility.

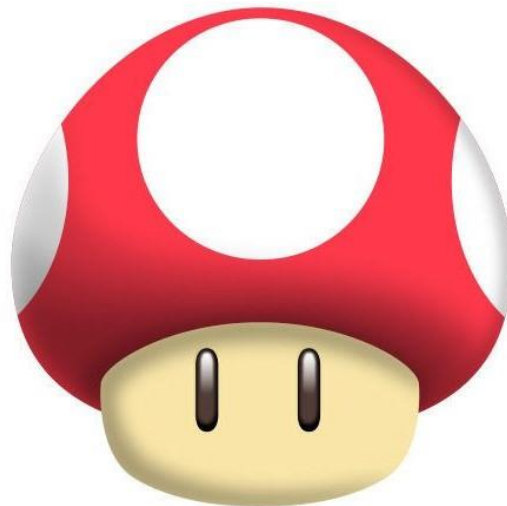


Those of you who have read some of my earlier notes will know that I enjoy a bit of ceramic ornithology and I couldn't resist trying to identify the type of duck this vessel was intended to represent. There are two characteristic features of my duck which help with this – the strangely erect tail and the odd looking face with a rather swollen beak in place of the usual flat duck bill (see

photo below). In fact there is a group of ducks which are specifically known for their erect tails and swollen bills – they are called stiff tail ducks. No species of stiff tail duck is currently found in Egypt, but one does live and breed in north Africa and it is not unreasonable to think it might have had a more extended range in ancient Egyptian times. This is the White-headed Duck. You can judge for yourself from the photo on the right below.



Not a lot is known about the Hyksos, but they did leave behind some statues which indicate that they wore their hair in a strange mushroom-like shape (see below). I'm afraid it made me think of a super mushroom in SuperMario!



Kevin Akhurst. July 2024