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Helwan Pottery Collection of National Museum of Egyptian Civilization. Results of Preliminary Analysis

Introduction

It appears that the prehistoric Helwan area was a very attractive region in the history of ancient Egypt. In Wadi Houf near Helwan, for example, we have found hand axes dating back to the Lower Paleolithic period, which are distinguished from a variety of tools of the Upper Paleolithic such as arrowheads with double-notched bases, piercers, crescent tools and borers. Mesolithic tools from Helwan are similar to, and are clearly influenced by tools from Mount Carmel area in the Mesolithic Natufian culture of Palestine. Helwan then developed into a semi-Neolithic culture with no pottery.

The importance of Helwan in the Neolithic period is related to el-Omari, which is considered to be the latest stage of the Neolithic period in the Nile Delta and the link between Neolithic sites in the Delta and those that belong to the Chalcolithic period (Predynastic), such as al-Maadi, which was an important point on the trade route to the Eastern Mediterranean. The frequent presence of copper indicates a connection to the sources of copper ore in Sinai or parts of Palestine. At the beginning of the dynastic period Helwan cemetery was a suburb of the capital (Memphis) which lies on the opposite side of the Nile. This conclusion is due to the huge number of graves that Zaki Saad found in Ezbet el-Walda to the north-west of Helwan. We now understand from the name of Helwan (Hr'oun = High Oun) that it was the southern extension of the famous historical city of Oun (Heliopolis).

Table 1. Helwan pottery collection.

No.	Types of pottery	Frequency
1	Funnel shape vessel	82
2	Barrel shape vessel	44
3	Cylindrical shape vessel	38
4	Bowl	39
5	Pointed base vessel	26
6	Part of stopper	24
7	Lid	20
8	Dish	17
9	Rectangular shape vessel	17
10	Spherical shape vessel	16
11	Conical shape vessel	13
12	Stopper	13
13	Pear shape vessel	12
14	Ewer	15
15	Model of silo	41
16	lamp	12
17	Model of Boat	9
18	Stela	9
19	Coffin	7
20	Spool	8
21	Censer	6
22	Large mouth Vessel	7
23	Unclassification vessel	35

It is clear now that the ancient Egyptians may have learned, unwittingly, how to make pottery in the late Upper Paleolithic; some fired chips of clay were found under fireplaces of the Sebilian culture in Upper Egypt. We assume that these chips were an important step on the way of making pottery for the ancient Egyptians.

The oldest site at which pottery has been found is Bir Kessiba on the road called Darb al-Arba'in. It is dated from the middle of the eighth millennium B.C. and included potsherds of sand paste and mica, with simple, geometric notches.

From the same period, we found sherds of pottery at many sites in Bashandi and Sheikh Mofteh in Dakhla Oasis. From the seventh millennium B.C. we found some sherds with engraved decorations from Nabta. Some potsherds were also discovered at the site of Fayum B from the end of the eighth millennium and the beginning of the seventh millennium B.C.

Helwan pottery collection

The collection of this study was found between 1940 and 1951 near Helwan, south of Cairo. It was that cemetery, located in front of Memphis (*Ineb Hedj*) and a little to the south of Oun (Heliopolis) on the east bank of the Nile where the Egyptian archeologist Zaki Saad discovered about 10,258 tombs during twelve seasons of work and despite these tombs having yielded huge amounts of vessels and many other objects still waiting to be studied. Recently the Egyptian Ministry of Culture decided to exhibit this important collection of pottery in the National Museum of Egyptian Civilization (NMEC), which is a new museum dedicated to Egyptian civilization from the prehistoric period to the present day.

The Helwan pottery collection goes back to the Proto-Dynastic and Early Dynastic periods of Egypt. It contains some objects showing the features of Naqada III (vessels with a net decoration, wavy-handled vessels) and some showing the names of First Dynasty kings like Hor-Aha and Den.

The collection shows great variation, first, in the material used. There are two kinds of pots: those that are made of clay and those made of Nile mud. Second, in the decoration: while many objects have no decoration, some have kept elements of decoration, such as ropes, birds, animals, scratches, or even the name of the vessel's contents, the owner or the reigning king in a *serekh*. Third, in purpose: there are different uses for these objects.

We suggest to classify them as follows:

Everyday vessels

This group of vessels includes forms used during basic, everyday activities.

1-A. Serving vessels (1-A)

These comprise shallow and deep dishes, bowls, cups, pots (in some there were the remains of food, possibly offered by the family of the deceased to sustain him in the afterlife). Other utensils, such as pot stands, ladles and other items, were also found, in addition to models of small pots, some for aromatic oils and some for medical materials. The belief among people,

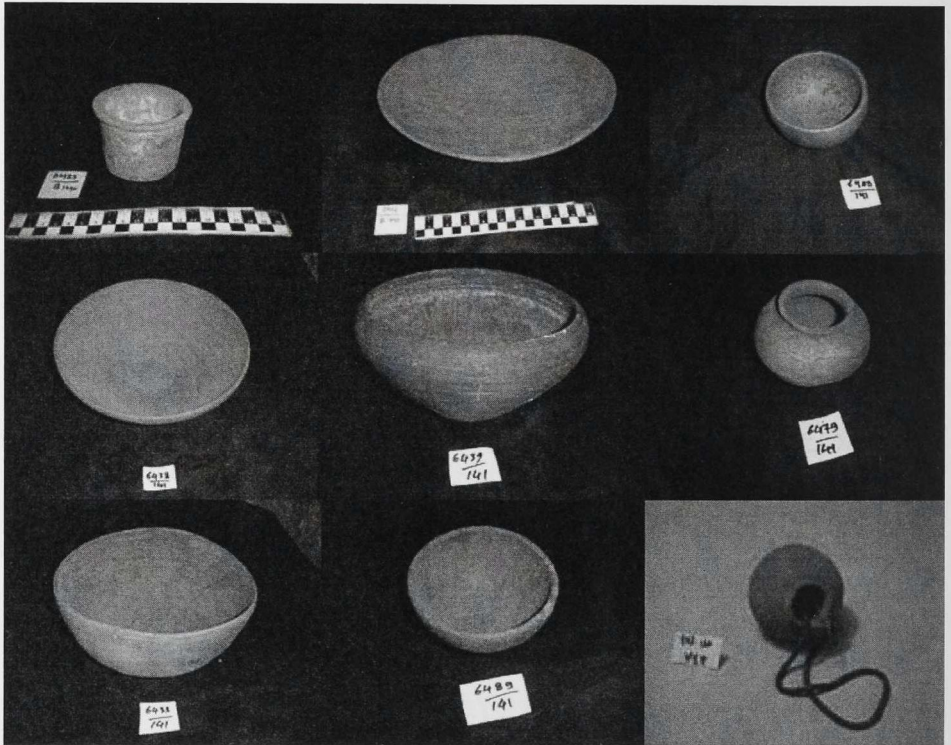


Fig. 1. Collection of serving vessels (dishes, bowls, cups, pots) a necklace found in one of pots.

especially those who lacked resources, was that thanks to prayers and magical spells, these small pots would be turned into real ones to be used in the second life. (Fig. 1).

Holding vessels (1-B)

These are relatively large pots devoted to holding liquids such as milk, wine, beer or solid materials, such as salt, the remnants of which were found in some, or for keeping fruit, such as dates and nabk, or grain and pulses including wheat, barley and lentils. These pots are spherical, conical, cylindrical, funnel shaped, pear shaped and in other forms. There are jar stoppers (some bearing the names of First Dynasty kings, including Narmer, Hor Aha, Anedjib, Djer, Den, Semerkhet and Qaa). In some cases we found the name of the vessel's contents written in black or the name of the person to whom it was dedicated, together with the name of the king in whose reign he lived, or for whom he worked. For example, there is a pot with the name of King Anedjib,

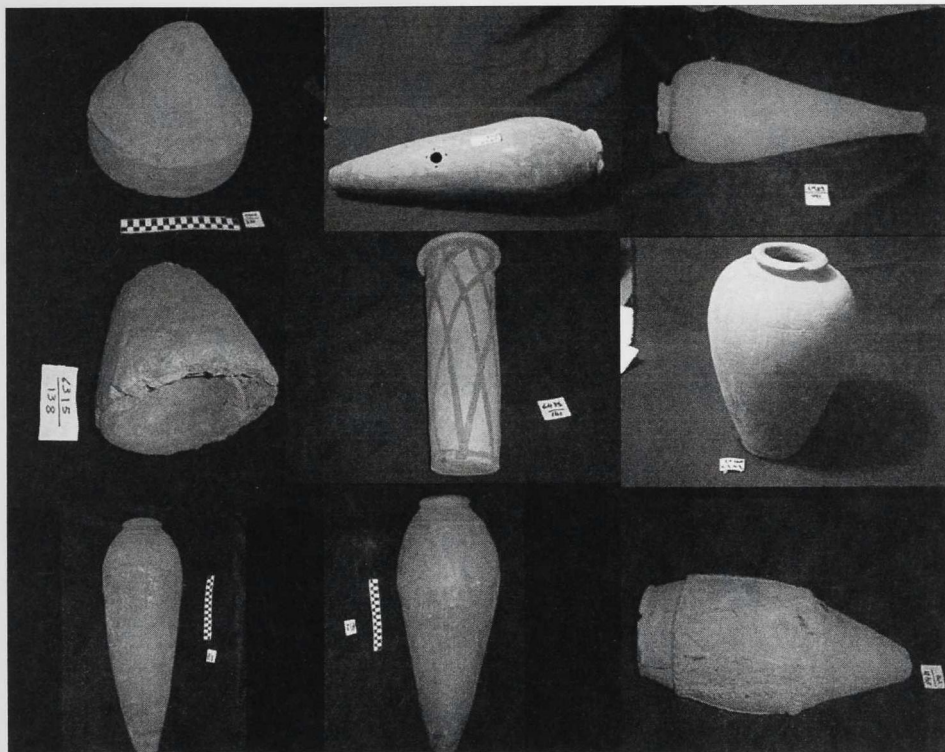


Fig. 2. Collection of holding vessels (Jars, stoppers, cylindrical, funnel shape vessels one has painting net decoration, one has carving net decoration and some have name of first dynasty kings or name of its contents.

the sixth king of the First Dynasty. Another vessel bore the name of King Den, the fifth king of the same dynasty, along with the name of the owner of the tomb. In one tomb we found two vessel stoppers, one with the name of King Hor-Aha and the other with the name of King Djer, which gave the impression that the deceased lived during the reigns of both kings (Fig. 2).

Storage vessels (1-C)

These include silos (in which remnants of cereals and pulses, such as wheat, barley, and lentils were found), model of silos, as well as models of granaries of rooms. One model consisted of a yard containing silos. These models served the same purpose assigned to them in subsequent historical times, to help the deceased in the afterlife. They show how the Egyptians at that period were organized in what concerned their lives, and these stores that came from *mattamores* known by the ancient Egyptians since they ceased

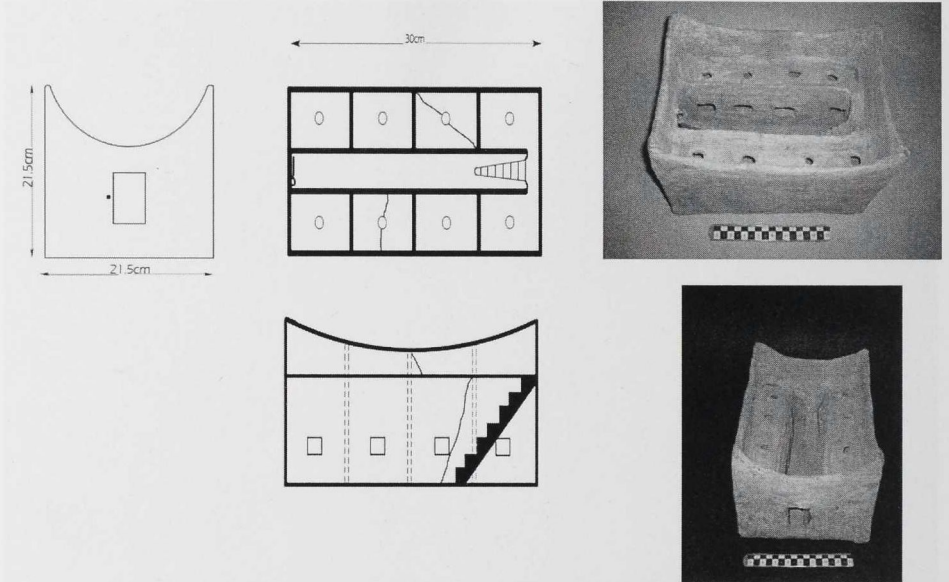


Fig. 3. Model of granary with rooms and different sections to it .

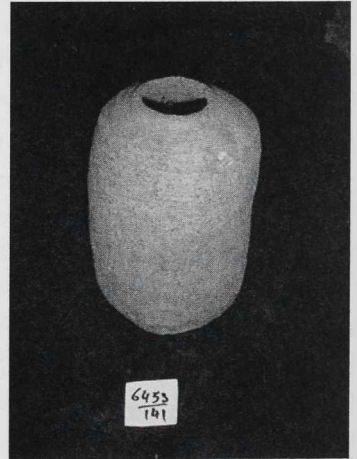
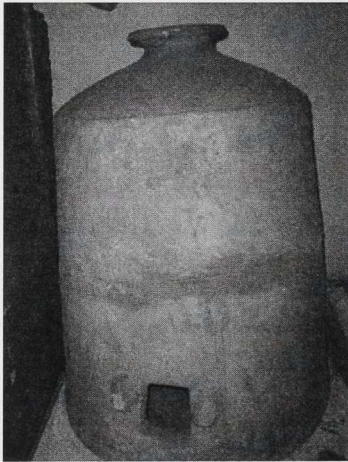


Fig. 4. Examples of storage vessels; silo of cereals on the left and model of silo on the right

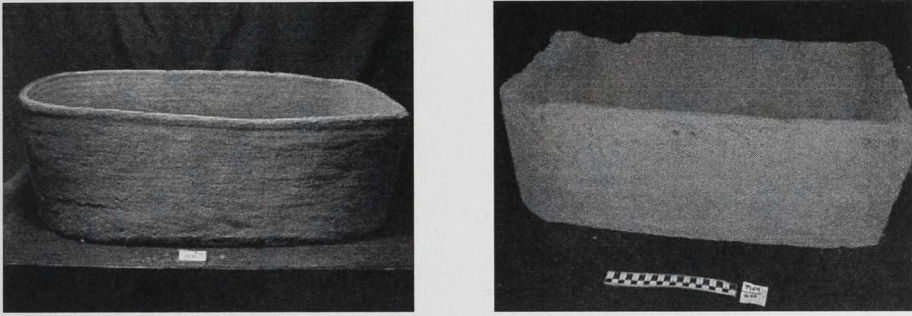


Fig. 5. Pottery coffins; oval shape on the left and rectangular on the right.

wandering and settled in Merimda, Fayoum, and other Neolithic sites. Zaki Saad found at the site fixed silos built of mud brick or mud lumps similar to the ones that are still used in the Egyptian countryside today (Fig. 3-4).

Funerary pottery

This includes pottery sarcophagi and other objects that may be used in funeral rites.

Coffins (2-A)

A number of clay coffins are rectangular or oval in shape. Some contain the remains of skeletons in the extended or fetal positions. One is painted white, and in one case we found a relief of a double shrine. Another has six holes on the side; some have lids; some contained a vessel or two beside the deceased. In a few the bodies were covered with tar. In spite of their poor condition, these burials have given us a lot of information about the evolution of burial customs and sarcophagi in the Proto-Dynastic and Early Dynastic periods (Fig. 5).

Ritual pottery (2-B)

A range of items related to ritual and religious rites includes vessels and purification utensils (ewers, washbasins, censers and sistra) that are considered to be the beginnings of those used in later periods. There are also a number of boat models, which accompanied the dead in their graves. The remains of the real boats were found buried in the cemetery beside the tombs because they were needed nearby as a means of crossing the sky in the company of the sun god. One of the oldest boat models, from Merimde, was an imitation of the original boats made of papyrus; models of boats like these were also



Fig. 6. Collection of ritual pottery (Ewers, censers, model of papyrus boat

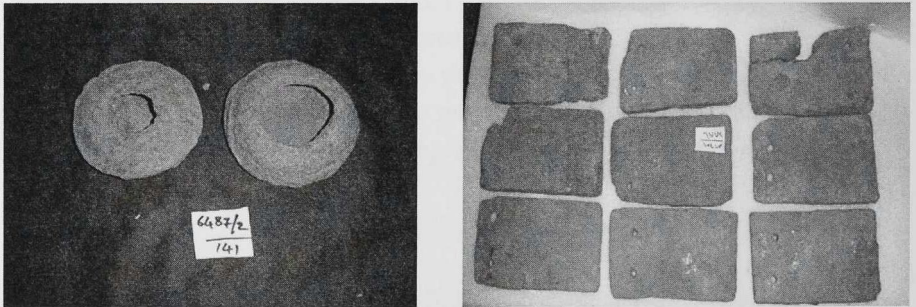


Fig. 7. Pottery lamps on the left, pottery stelae each one has two holes.

found in Badari and Naqada I and II. The widespread use of boats in pottery decoration during the Naqada II period might have been done intentionally, to be the means of accompanying the sun god in the afterlife. Or at least to be like amulets to please and protect the deceased (Fig. 6).

Other pottery types

Spinning tools (3-A)

A range of tools including a number of spools and several pieces of pottery, which resemble the pins that had fixed the threads onto the wooden loom since the beginning of the First Dynasty, at the very least. Some tools for spinning were found in a tomb from the First Dynasty and are already the subject of study.

Unclassified pottery (3-B)

This category contains a number of flat stelae with no inscriptions and with two holes, tubes, seals, lamps, ink pots and other objects (Fig. 7).

Acknowledgments

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