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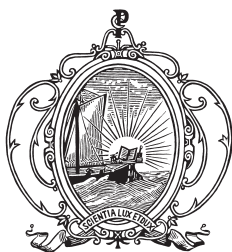
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DUST, DEMONS AND POTS

Studies in Honour of Colin A. Hope

edited by

ASHTEN R. WARFE, JAMES C.R. GILL, CALEB R. HAMILTON,
AMY J. PETTMAN and DAVID A. STEWART



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BETWEEN EGYPT AND KERMA: A STRANGE TULIP-BEAKER FROM MIRGISSA

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University of Swansea, Swansea

This paper is dedicated to Colin with thanks for his support and guidance while I was at Monash. It dwells on two of the areas of research where he has made a major contribution to archaeology, namely techniques of ancient Egyptian pottery manufacture and the interaction of different regions and societies in northeastern Africa in antiquity.

One of the most characteristic pottery forms for the *Classique* phase at Kerma in Upper Nubia are so-called Tulip-Beakers (e.g. Gratién 1978; 1986, 432–3; Lacovara 1987; Privati 1999) (Fig. 1). This type denotes a deep bowl with a flattened or lightly rounded base and everted rim, made of fine alluvial silt clay mixed with some quartz, mica particles and abundant fine dung temper (Nordström and Bourriau 1993, 183; Seiler 2005, 84; Helmbold-Doyé and Selier 2012, 35). Tulip-Beakers were always handmade; the walls are extremely thin and the vessels are remarkably light. The final finishing of the vessels has in most cases removed any visible traces of manufacture but it can be presumed that the preliminary vessel form (roughout) was created by hand coiling (i.e. Arnold and Bourriau 1993, 21), whereas the final vessel form (preform) was achieved by the ‘paddle-and-anvil’ technique (e.g. Arnold and Bourriau 1993, 17–20). The surface is highly polished and exhibits a distinctive colour scheme; the interior and top of the exterior are black, probably enhanced by the application of a lead coating (i.e. Säve-Söderbergh 1989, 58), whereas the lower half of the exterior has a red-brown slip. At the point of transition from the black to the red, there was often a silver-purple stripe which appears to have been caused by combination of an iron bearing substance applied to the vessel (Lacovara 1987, 62; Säve-Söderbergh 1989, 58)² and the practice of placing the

¹ The research and writing of this paper was funded by the FWF funded START project ‘Beyond Politics: Material Culture in Second Intermediate Period Egypt and Nubia’ (FWF-Y754-G19) led by Bettina Bader at the Austrian Academy of Sciences. The author wishes to thank Liam McNamara (Ashmolean Museum) for permission to record and publish the pot illustrated in Figure 1, Mohamed Abdl Rahman (Sudan Nation Museum) for permission to record and publish the pot illustrated in Figure 2, Peter Lacovara for sharing his ideas and some unpublished images of the Kerma pots with me and Aaron de Souza who read a draft of this paper and made some useful suggestions.

² The issue of how the silvery stripe was produced, however, is still not fully resolved.

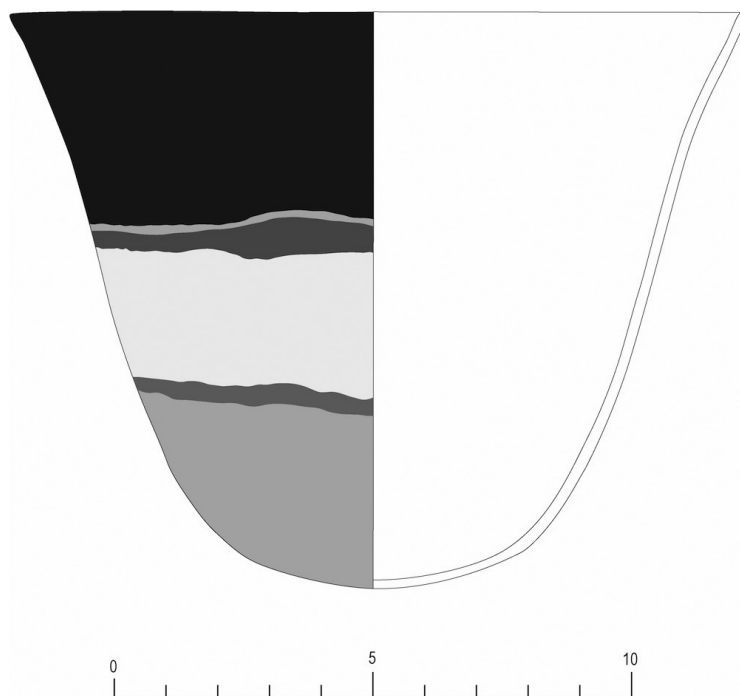


Figure 1. Ashmolean E 1910.692. Black-topped red polished Tulip-Beaker from Abydos, Cemetery O Grave 4. Drawing by author, inking by E. Schuster ('Beyond Politics').

vessels upside down partially buried in combustible material for firing. The vessels are usually considered as drinking receptacles and occur both as grave goods as well as in settlement contexts in Nubia (Reisner 1923b, 328–52). In Egypt where this type of vessel is not uncommon in both settlement and cemeteries, examples of Tulip-Beakers are usually interpreted as imported gifts or status symbols, or, when combined with Nubian burial practices, indicative of the presence of Kerman people living in Egypt (Bourriau 1981; Seiler 2005, 117).

This paper discusses an unusual tulip-shaped vessel that varies significantly from the type just introduced and that raises questions concerning the potential influence of Kerman pottery on Egyptian potters or, conversely, the influence of the techniques of Egyptian potters on the production of Kerman pottery during the late Second Intermediate Period. The vessel in question is now in the Sudan National Museum in Khartoum (SNM 14033) (Fig. 2) and comes from the Egyptian colonial site at Mirgissa in the Second Cataract. The vessel was part of the grave assemblage of a wealthy tomb (Tombe KT.2 nr. 35) that belonged

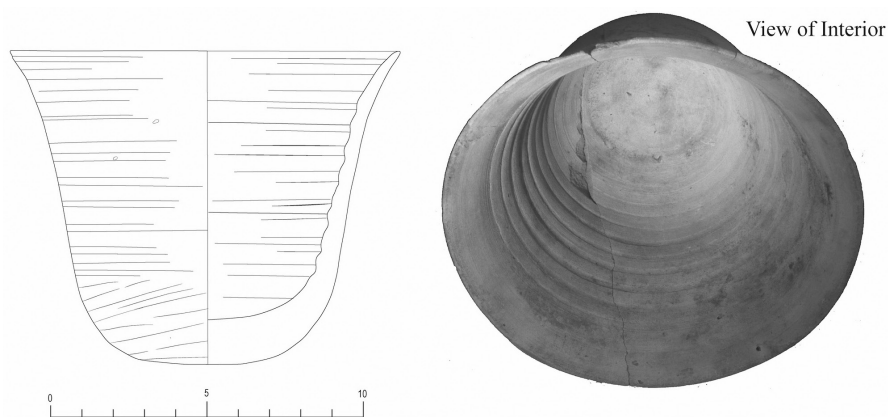


Figure 2. SNM Khartoum 14033. Tulip-Beaker from Mirgissa Grave KT.2. Photograph L. Hulková, drawing author, inking by E. Schuster ('Beyond Politics').

to a small Kerman Cemetery (M.III) excavated and published by Andre Vila (1970, 230–40; Bonnet 1990, 325–32; Gratien and Le Saout 1994, 149–53). The cemetery evidently represents a small community of Kerman people living alongside a substantial Egyptian colonial population at Mirgissa during the late Second Intermediate Period. In addition to the tulip-shaped vessel discussed below, the tomb of an adult female contained a bronze mirror, stone vessels, Egyptian manufactured scarabs and pottery, as well as examples of typical Kerman black-topped ware, including a Tulip-Beaker of the type discussed above (Vila 1970, 234, fig. 9:a) (Fig. 3). As was normal for Kerman burial practice during the *Kerma Classique* period, the tulip-shaped beaker SNM 14033 was nested inside the other beaker from the grave to form a short stack that was placed near the feet of the deceased (Reisner 1923a, 173, figs 48–50; Vila 1970, 229, fig. 6Ba:7). The customs and assemblages are typical for the late *Kerma Classique* (i.e. Lacovara 1987) and the grave should date to the very late Second Intermediate Period to very early New Kingdom (Ben-Tor 2007, 57).

SNM 14033 is a tulip-shaped beaker with a maximum diameter of 12.5 cm and a height of 10 cm and is almost the exact size and shape of the black-topped beaker from the same tomb. However, unlike the latter vessel, it is made of a pale green-yellow fabric with little visible temper on the surface apart from some fine quartz particles. The distinctive colour and absence of any organic admixture both suggest that the vessel was made from calcium carbonate-rich marl formed in Upper Cretaceous and Miocene Period sedimentary layers (Nordström and Bourriau 1993, 61, 158). In fact, the fabric seems to be very similar to the marl-based fabrics used by Egyptian potters during the Second Inter-

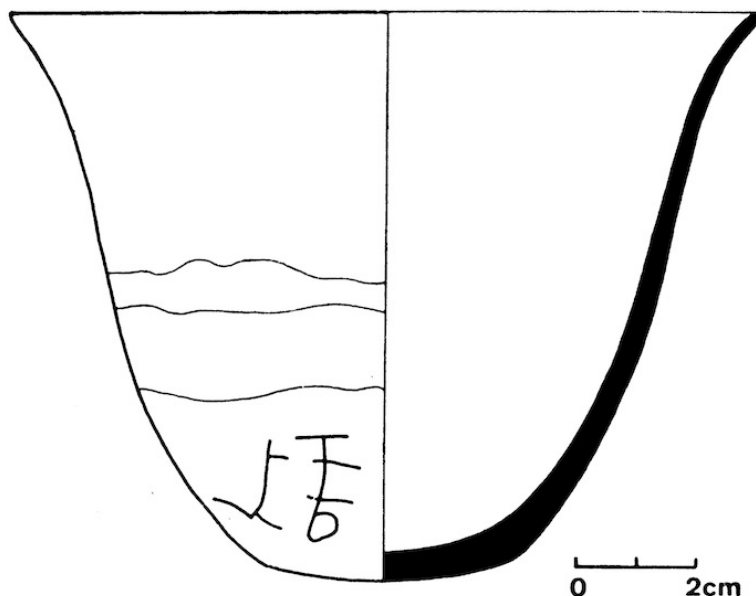


Figure 3. Black-topped red polished Tulip-Beaker from Mirgissa Grave KT.2 (Vila 1970, fig. 9a).

mediate Period and early New Kingdom, for example Marl A2 or Marl A3 (Nordström and Bourriau 1993, 176–7). The unusual choice of fabric for this vessel shape is mirrored by the steps the potter followed in order to produce the pot (the *chaîne opératoire*), which are identical to those followed by potters working in the Egyptian Nile Valley to produce many types of vessels in this period. The potter had first drawn up the walls of the vessel on a wheel, resulting in rilling marks on the interior and fine and superficial horizontal lines on the exterior. The rilling marks are very evenly spaced and relatively deep, indicating that the potter's wheel used to produce the vessel was capable of exerting considerable force. This in turn suggests that the vessel was thrown on a type of high-stemmed wheel that had been introduced into Egypt during the late Middle Kingdom (i.e. Arnold and Bourriau 1993, 61–3) and that the potter had a high level of proficiency at working a marl-based paste on a wheel of this type. Following an Egyptian Nile Valley method for producing flattened or rounded bases that survived into the early New Kingdom (Seiler 2005, 155), the vessel was then removed from the hump and worked on manually by the potter who formed the vessel base into its final shape with the aid of a tool. The traces of this modelling (trimming) can be recognised in the short diagonal strokes around the base of the vessel (e.g. Arnold and Bourriau 1993, 55–6).

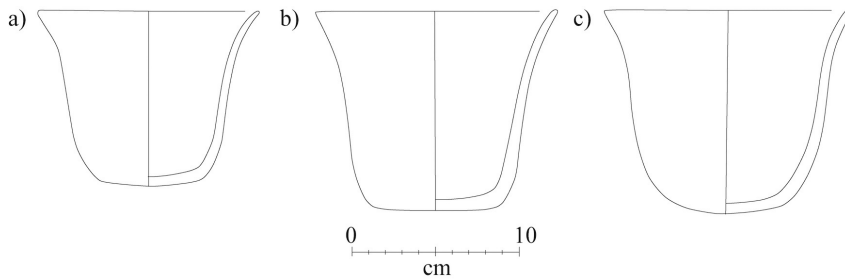


Figure 4. a–c) Red Ware Tulip-Beakers from Deposit KXXXIIIa at Kerma, after Reisner (1923b, fig. 300).

As was customary for many types of utilitarian Egyptian pottery at this time, the vessel surface was not further embellished or decorated and the vessel was fired to a high temperature – presumably in excess of approx. 800–1000 degrees Celsius (Nordström and Bourriau 1993, 176–9) – with the traces of manufacture still clearly visible.

In summary, while the morphology of SNM 14033 is Kerman, it was produced in a probable Egyptian style fabric and undoubtedly in an Egyptian manner that makes the vessel look and feel like a typical Egyptian pot. Moreover, the vessel was found in a Kerman context and was arranged in the grave according to typical Kerman practice. The only possible signs of use are some red patches on the interior, but these are best explained as post-depositional staining due to the placement of the beaker next to an ochre deposit in the grave (Vila 1970, fig. 6Ba:8). Some marks on the outside visible in the photo are probably dirt.

There are no further published examples for this curious vessel type at Mirgissa. In fact, the only broad parallels appear to be a group of 10 vessels from the site of Kerma that have been discussed by Peter Lacovara (1987, 62–3) (Fig. 4). These vessels, at least three of which are now in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, were probably originally part of a huge deposit of pottery and other items found by Reisner (1923a, 470–6, plan v [opposite 92]) in front of a chapel-like building (KXXXIIIa) in the Eastern Cemetery. Given the placement of the chapel in the cemetery and the associated material culture, the date should be in *Kerma Classique* III as defined by Lacovara, which is contemporary with the advanced Seventeenth Dynasty in Egypt and thus roughly contemporary with the Mirgissa context discussed above (Lacovara 1997, table 3.1). The pottery component of the deposit, around 200 vessels in total, consisted primarily of black-topped beakers of normal late *Kerma Classique* forms nested inside one another in 26 stacks. Some of the 10 vessels being discussed here were in a stack together, while others were in stacks where they were mixed

with regular black-topped beakers, with which, for practical purposes, they appear to have been interchangeable.

In Reisner's pottery classification, the vessels from Deposit KXXXIIIa are listed as Red Ware Type XXIII-1, 2 and 3 and are described as being 'of the usual Bkt. [Black topped red polished] material, well smoothed with red wash' (Reisner 1923b, 419) and Reisner (1923a, 472–3; 1923b, 329), in fact, considered these vessels to be 'really unfinished' black-topped red polished beakers. However, as discussed by Lacovara (1987, 63 n.10), the vessels were made from 'a higher fired Nile silt ware' than the black-topped beakers, and xeroradiography has demonstrated that the vessels were made on the wheel. Images of these vessels provided to me by Lacovara indicate that the bases of the vessels in question were probably trimmed into shape by hand, much like the Mirgissa vessel, and that the vessels were finally covered by a red slip.

With regards to the production of the wheel-made beakers from Kerma, Lacovara (1987, 63) has pointed out that 'an examination of these vessels indicates a certain unfamiliarity with the potter's wheel, suggesting that these too are the work of local craftsmen and not Egyptian potters'. If this is accepted, it may be postulated that Kerman potters were not using Egyptian technology to make imitations of Egyptian pottery; rather, they were adapting Egyptian technology to find new ways of making their own style of pottery. This, of course, was at a time when the power of Kerma was at its pinnacle and its sphere of influence and activity extended into Lower Nubia (Säve-Söderbergh 1949) and even the Egyptian Nile Valley (i.e. Davies 2003; Valbelle 2004). This blurring of former political and cultural boundaries created the conditions for a reception of new technologies at Kerma (i.e. Lacovara 1986; Smith 1998) which were never simply passively adopted but selectively adapted to suit Kerman ideals and practices. The evidence for locally produced wheel-made pottery discussed here fits this narrative well. It is worth stressing that the postulated evidence for wheel-made pottery at Kerma occurred in the same era in which Kerman pottery production generally is characterised by a great deal of variety and invention (Lacovara 1987, 57) and it is in this fertile context for creativity that this small-scale experimentation with the potter's wheel would perhaps be best understood. Given the similarity of the Mirgissa beaker to those from Kerma and their broad chronological parity, it might be explained in the same way, whereby one must assume that SNM 14033 was imported to Mirgissa from a major Kerman settlement further south, if not from Kerma itself.³

In summary, the scale of innovation/adoption by Kerman potters during the late Second Intermediate Period that these vessels would represent is considerable. Firstly, it entailed developing new silt and marl fabrics, thus novel ways

³ The possibility that a Kerman potter was working at Mirgissa as well, cannot be entirely discounted. This, of course, would also be a fertile context for experimentation.

of selecting and preparing clays for potting. Secondly, it involved the adoption of an entirely new method for fashioning the rough vessel form, with a combination of wheel throwing and hand trimming replacing the millennia-old Nubian tradition of hand-forming. The method of finishing the vessel surface on the wheel exhibited by these vessels was naturally unknown at Kerma previously. Lastly but significantly, the new fabrics and forming technique demanded the adoption and perfection of a new firing technology that was capable of achieving higher temperatures. In summary, the invention/adoption of Kerma potters is nothing short of the adoption of an entirely new *chaîne opératoire*, which raises the question of whether this scenario is the right one. As anthropological studies of potters show, ways of making pottery are intimately connected with the identity of the social groups in which potters were organised (i.e. Roux 2011, 81–2; 2015, 70–1). A potter characteristically learns and ‘assimilates’ the skills and techniques of the social group during an apprenticeship after which it is ‘difficult for the individual to conceive and do things differently from the way in which he has learnt them’ (Roux 2011, 82). Invention and innovation, of course, are commonplace and may be classified as change within an already existing tradition (endogenous evolution) or through the adoption of new stylistic or technological features that results from the exposure to the work of other potters or direct contact with other social groups (exogenous evolution) (Roux 2011, 82). Normal for this last type of transformation is the adoption of individual ‘technical features’, for practical/functional or symbolic reasons, but the abrupt adoption of an entirely new ‘technical system’ represents a discontinuity which is highly unusual because of the close link between technology, skills and social group (e.g. Roux 2015, 71). If technological systems are closely related to social groups, this might rather indicate that the wheel-made tulip vessels were made by a group of potters unrelated to the potters at Kerma who were responsible for producing the great majority of pottery at that site.

Another scenario is that the wheel-made tulip vessels were in fact made in workshops already producing pottery in an Egyptian Nile Valley technological tradition but which were adopting individual stylistic-morphological features from Kerman pottery. Obvious candidates for the location of such workshops would be the Egyptian colonial settlements in Lower Nubia and the Batn el-Hagar where pottery production is well attested for the Middle Kingdom and later (Knoblauch 2011; Smith 2014; Reshetnikova and Williams 2016).⁴ These settlements were directly under the influence of Kerma during the late Second Intermediate Period (e.g. Säve-Söderbergh 1949) and the potters living in these towns could have been experimenting with new stylistic features such as Kerman vessel forms in order to produce pottery for Kerman customers or patrons. Some of these Kerman customers might have been neighbours, for example at

⁴ It is not known if marl pottery was produced in Lower Nubia and the Batn el-Hagar.

Mirgissa where there was a small permanent Kerman population, but others might have been in distant places, for example Kerma, which was connected to the settlements of the Second Cataract by different means, including long-distance networks of ceramic distribution (Bourriau 2004; Knoblauch 2011, 175). Potters working in an Egyptian Nile Valley pottery tradition but living in the zone of direct Kerman influence, therefore, may have been adapting to the spirit of the times and shifting consumer tastes.

The adoption of individual stylistic-morphological features into an existing Egyptian *chaîne opératoire* implied by this latter option is perhaps easier to imagine than the adoption of an entirely new Egyptian *chaîne opératoire* and technological system by Kerman potters, but as scientific provenience studies have been conducted on neither the Mirgissa nor Kerman pots discussed here their place of production and the cultural context in which this occurred must remain the subject of speculation. In any case, the strange case of the wheel-made Tulip-Beakers points once again to the complexities of interactions in Nubia during the Second Intermediate Period and the level of detailed archaeological information pertaining to technology as well as contexts of production and use that are required if we are to make proper sense of the material remains that attest to such interactions. It is also a neat illustration of the limitations of the language commonly used to describe material culture in the archaeology of Nubia which often relies on a simple dichotomy, for example Egyptian pottery versus Nubian Pottery. This assumes that there are always clear objective criteria (e.g. wheel-made versus handmade pottery) by which these two major groups of pottery may be distinguished from one another.⁵ The wheel-made Tulip-Beakers from Mirgissa and Kerma show that this might not always be the case.

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⁵ See for example the various articles in Forstner Müller and Rose (2012) which all use this basic dichotomy.

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