

AN EVOCATION OF MOTHERHOOD AND BREASTFEEDING IN POTTERY FROM THE NECROPOLEIS OF ANCIENT EGYPT

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This article is aimed at identifying the relevant meaning of wet-nurse goddesses in funerary concepts through the study of a particular group of fragmentary vessels found in the necropolis of Dra Abu el-Naga in the course of the fieldwork carried out by the Spanish Expedition led by José M. Galán.¹ They cover a wide chronological span that goes from the First Intermediate Period to the late Second Intermediate Period/early New Kingdom. This study is focused upon the functional analyses of these ceramics in order to explain the choice of their particular decoration, their related techniques, and symbolic meanings as well as the purpose of their use and their relation with specific ceremonies connected to the rebirth of the dead to a new life after death.

1. FUNERARY BELIEFS, WET-NURSE GODDESSES AND POTTERY VESSELS

Death in ancient Egypt was understood not as an end but as a beginning, the beginning of a new sort of existence into which the deceased was re-born through the magical power of the funerary rituals. The deceased started his new life in the thereafter as a newborn baby who has to overcome the earlier stages of human life,² even though his new existence took place on a spiritual plane. In order to assist the birth of the new-born creature and attend to his well-being, wet-nurse goddesses such as Isis, Nephthys, Hathor, and Renenutet among others, were invoked not only because they had the capacity to produce the most nutritious food for the beginning of human life, milk, but also because two of them, namely Isis and Nephthys, were regarded in ancient Egypt as skilled midwives.³

Pottery vessels alluding to these goddesses and therefore to mother's milk and other notions related to motherhood and breastfeeding, are frequently found in the necropoleis of ancient Egypt.⁴ These ceramics include specific decorative motifs, such as wavy line patterns and added lumps of clay fashioned in the shape of breasts as well as arms, hands and human faces. The intended function of these ceramics, whether real or symbolic is still elusive, but some suggestions can be made based on their specific decoration and archaeological context. Their analysis in connection with iconographic and written evidence also provides an interesting source of information.

¹ GALÁN 2007: 777–787; GALÁN 2015.

² ROTH 1992: 121–123.

³ LICHTHEIM 1984: 220–222.

⁴ BRUNTON 1930: pl. 27.100; BOURRIAU 1982: 78; BOURRIAU 1987: 86, pl. XXVI, 1; WILLIAMS 1992: 39–40, 177, fig. 34, a, pl. 25; SEILER 2006: 317–327. Similar vessels found in settlement contexts are analysed in J. Budka's article in this volume.

2. POTTERY TYPES INVOLVED AND THEIR DECORATION

The group of ceramics considered in this study includes four different pottery types, two related to closed forms and two related to open forms. The former include mourner or Isis vessels and slender jars of medium or small size, both types represented by several fragmentary vases. Open forms, namely, a bowl and a large plate, are represented by a single specimen of each category. Some sherds including the same ornamental motifs have also been found, some of them in such small fragments that it is impossible to ascertain a precise vessel shape for them. Most of these ceramics were found while clearing the uppermost levels of the site or in rubbish pits and levels of backfill. Only few of them come from closed archaeological contexts, which are briefly described in this paper.

2.1. Mourner or Isis vessels

The so-called mourner vessels, or Isis vessels,⁵ comprise a kind of jar which is relatively homogeneous in terms of their raw material, morphology and decoration. Such vessels are made in Nile silt, thrown on the wheel as bag-shaped jars with wide bodies and mouths, and then their original form slightly fashioned by hand in order to emphasise an anatomical shape. They include small pieces of clay roughly modelled by hand applied to their outer surface before firing when the clay was leather-hard, in the basic shape of arms and hands, facial features and breasts that sometimes are pierced. One or both of the arms is raised towards the head or to the eyes in the traditional gesture of mourning. In some vessels one of the hands is raised while the other is turned to one of its breasts.⁶ A particular type of these vessels shows its base roughly shaped as a human head. Rested on their wide mouths, these vessels look like clay mourner figurines. Due to their voluminous shape and their closed form, it has been suggested that they could have been used as containers for food, perhaps to be consumed in the course of the funerary ceremonies.⁷

Mourner or Isis vessels are the most ancient dynastic Egyptian ceramics with plastic decoration giving details of the human female anatomy.⁸ They have been attested in Upper Egypt in funerary contexts dated to the First Intermediate Period, Middle Kingdom and late Second Intermediate Period/early 18th Dynasty,⁹ when they might be replaced by other types.

Fragments mainly from the mouth and upper part of the body of at least seven vessels of this kind, all of them in Nile B2, with traces of the arms raised to the head and details of facial features clearly indicated, have been found in our excavation (Fig. 1.a–h). Only one of these vessels, ornamented with added knobs of clay and incised wavy bands (Fig. 1.a–b), comes from a closed archaeological context which is dated to the Late Second Intermediate Period/early 18th Dynasty.¹⁰ The other uncovered pieces come mainly from rubbish pits and levels of backfill (Fig. 1. c–h).

2.2. Decorated slender jars

Slender jars of small or medium size and some fragments of the type in a rather large size are present in this group of ceramics either in Nile silt or Marl clays. They exhibit the

⁵ BOURRIAU 1988: 94–95, No 76; SEILER 2006: 320–322.

⁶ ARNOLD 1993: 91, fig. 100C.

⁷ BOURRIAU 1988: 94–95.

⁸ DORMAN 2002: 14.

⁹ BOURRIAU 1988: 94–95; SEILER 2006: 321–322; LÓPEZ-GRANDE 2013: 259–261, fig. 6, a–c.

¹⁰ LÓPEZ-GRANDE 2013: 259–261, fig. 6, a–c.

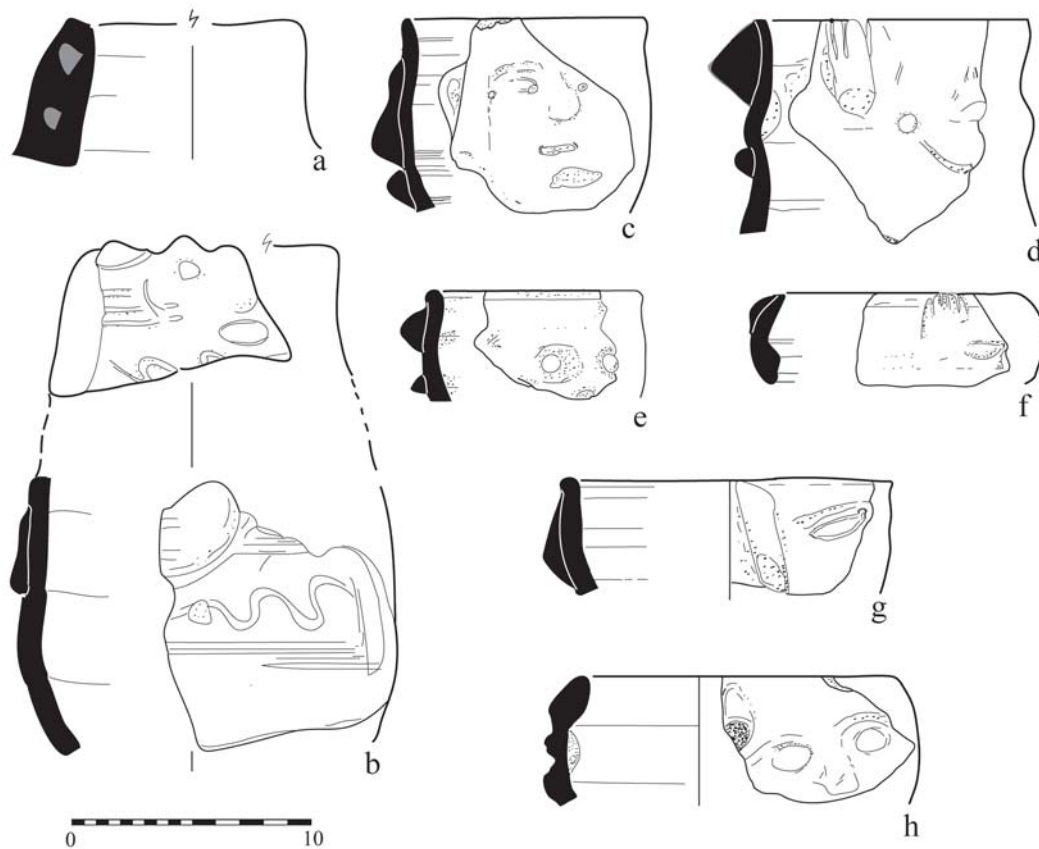


Fig. 1. a-b) 15C80B 26-1,2; c) 12F01-20; d) 13F-08II03; e) 12F20-1; f) 5D01-1; g) 14E00-9; h) 10E01-C514-1.

characteristic shape of a storage jar type widely attested either with or without applied or incised decoration, which goes back at least to the 12th Dynasty, lasting through the Second Intermediate Period and still occurring in contexts dated to the 18th Dynasty up to the reign of Thutmose III.¹¹ The type shows gently modelled shoulders where the maximum diameter of the vessel falls, medium long cylindrical and slightly outward neck, ovoid shaped body and round base. Decorated slender jars of this type including pre-firing incised wavy line patterns and/or plastic decoration evoking anatomical details, applied to their outer surface before being fired, have been found in funerary contexts in sites such as Qau, Qustul, Esna, Thebes and Aswan among other places.¹² These anthropomorphic vessels, some of them with pierced breasts, have been understood in relation to milk offerings and the cult of the goddess Hathor. Through the Second Intermediate Period and early 18th Dynasty they seem to replace the most ancient mourner or Isis vessels as well as jars ornamented with knobs of clay fashioned in the shape of a cow's head applied below their rims, obviously related to Hathor, attested in few examples.¹³ Eventually, the anthropomorphic vessels of the early-mid 18th

¹¹ BOURRIAU 1987: 86; SEILER 2005: 150, folding pl. 5.

¹² BRUNTON 1930: pl. 27.100; JACQUET-GORDON 1979: 29-30; WILLIAMS 1992: 177, fig. 34, a; DOWNES 1974: 28, Type 169, 48, 169A; SEILER 2006: 317-327; LÓPEZ-GRANDE and VALENTI COSTALES 2008: 116-120, figs. 4-5, 15.a.

¹³ PINCH 1993, lám. 38, from Faras, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, 1912.950; From Qubbet el-Hawa see: <http://www.ujen.es/investiga/qubbetelhawa/diario%202010/dia32.php> [29/11/2010].

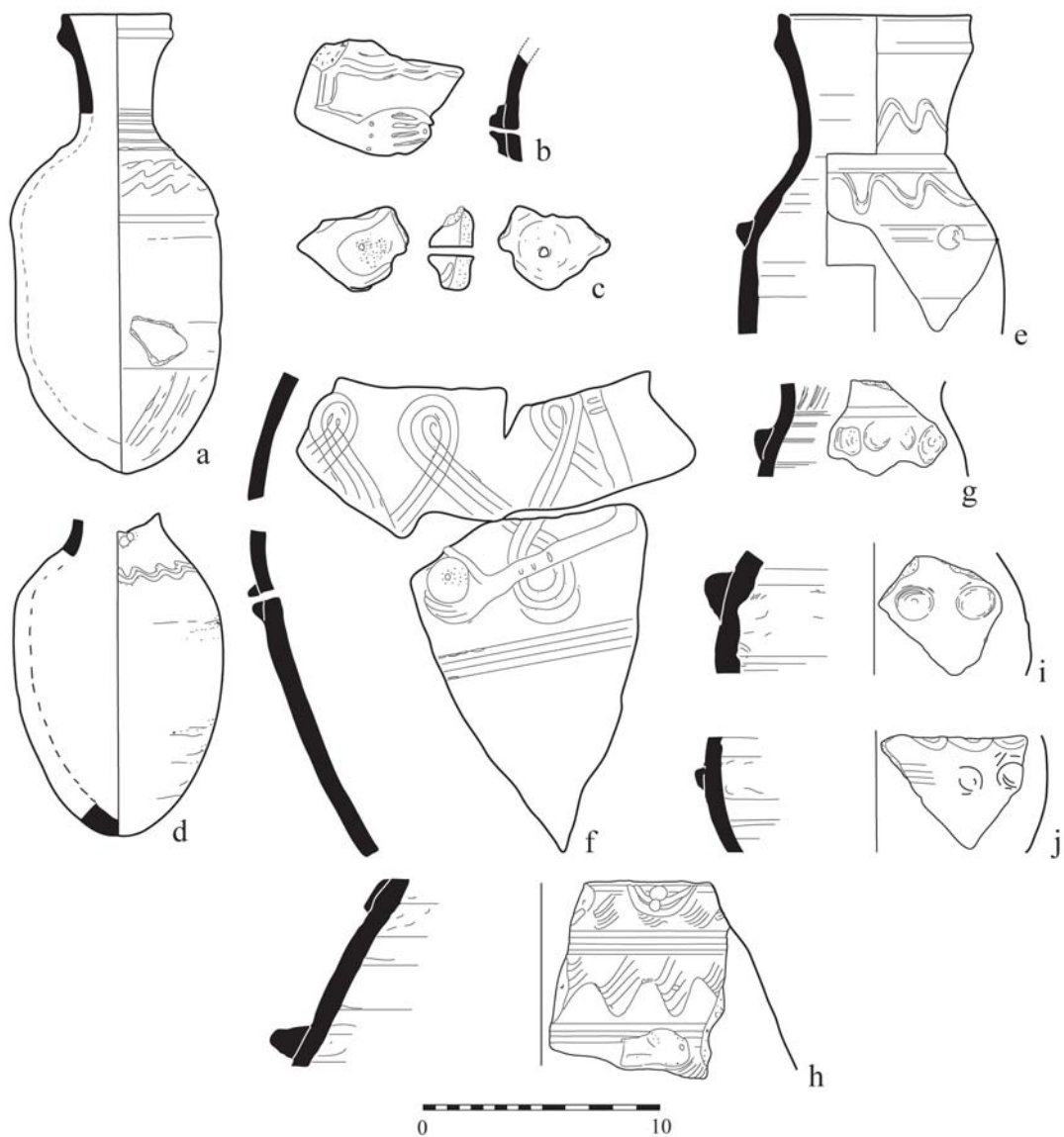


Fig. 2. a) 10G01 C409-1; b) 10B00-1; c) 6F01-4; d) 11F01-1; e) 10G01 C409-2; f) 10D02-2; g) 14E00-17; h) 4F01 20II06-1; i) 17G-190-1; j) 14E00-18.

Dynasty evolve into the jars ornamented with well defined female faces with cows' ears and Hathor's hairstyle shaped in relief, that was added to jars of the late 18th and 19th Dynasties.¹⁴

Decorated examples from our excavation are thrown in three parts; rim and shoulders, body and base. The particular parts were subsequently joined together. Their decoration can include incised or painted wavy lines done before firing in the leather-hard clay as well as applied decoration fashioned by hand in the basic shape of anatomical details of the human female anatomy and in the shape of snakes.

Incised wavy lines as decorative bands can be seen in several examples of our jars, dated to the Second Intermediate Period made of Marl A4 (Fig. 2.a, d). One of them (Fig. 2.a) also includes a ridge made in its own clay at the base of its neck. This jar shows a hole drilled in the lower part of its body which suggests that the vessel was used in some sacred ceremony and ritually killed after its performance. It was found associated with a fragmentary bowl

¹⁴ BOURRIAU 1982: 78, no 50.

made in the same fabric, its outer surface also decorated with incised wavy lines (Fig. 5.a).¹⁵ Another Marl A4 jar dated to the Second Intermediate Period shows a band of incised wavy lines at the base of its broken neck, and two small knobs of clay which are probably intended as an evocation of breasts (Fig. 2.d). Applied elements in a similar shape and size are shown in a slender Nile silt jar ornamented with horizontal incised lines of the 17th Dynasty, uncovered at Dra Abu el-Naga by the Expedition led by D. Polz.¹⁶

Several Marl clay sherds have also been found ornamented with similar motifs. They are preserved in such small fragments that it is impossible to ascertain a precise pottery type for them though they seem to belong to jars of slender shape of the late Second Intermediate Period/early 18th Dynasty up to the reign of Tuthmose III. One of them, from a rather large Marl A4 jar, shows incised bands of straight and wavy lines and includes two applied motifs (Fig. 2.h). One of them is composed of four lumps of clay applied side-by-side, two in the shape of the crescent moon, the other two as small circular pieces applied at the edge of the crescents in their middle. The other poorly preserved motif, looks like the remains of a wrist and a hand.

Other marl clay sherds ornamented with incised wavy lines also include applied decoration fashioned in the shape of a breast held in a hand. Among them, a fragment reconstructed from some Marl A4 sherds, seem to belong to a jar of a rather large size (Fig. 2.f). It shows applied decoration fashioned by hand in the shape of a left hand cupping a pierced breast. The arm, bent at the elbow, has small elongated grooves perhaps intended as decorative bracelets, three at the forearm and two in the preserved part of the arm. The outer surface of the fragment is also ornamented with incised lines in a composite undulating band with parallel straight lines below. Pieces of this fragmentary jar were found associated with some partially preserved pots, among them a large plate ornamented with an intricate incised design (Fig. 5.b). These vessels could be dated by reason of their shapes, decoration and fabrics, to the Second Intermediate Period/early 18th Dynasty.¹⁷

A finely fashioned right hand holding a well executed breast is depicted in a very small Marl A4 fragment (Fig. 2.c). The fingers are around the breast, cupping and raising it as a gesture of showing and offering it. The breast is pierced from outside to inside, the small hole carefully done with a fine tool when the clay was still wet. Also nicely modelled is another larger fragment (Fig. 2.b) with applied decoration fashioned by hand. It shows an arm and a right hand, the fingers holding a pierced nipple in a clear attitude of a wet-nurse offering her breast for breastfeeding. The wrist shows three small holes which might have once been filled with a coloured product, probably plaster, suggesting a bracelet. The arm is bent at the elbow and seems to be naked. A soft incised wavy line is partially preserved above the forearm, hand and nipple.

Incised wavy lines are also attested in fragmentary Nile B2 slender jars dated to the Second Intermediate Period (Fig. 2.e) uncovered in our excavation. A fragment restored from sherds belonging to the rim, neck and upper part of the jar's body includes a lump of clay in the shape of a small, non pierced breast added to its outer surface.¹⁸ Either the incised lines or the modelled breast were added to the jar before being fired, when the clay was leather-hard.

Small sherds belonging to this kind of jar are ornamented with added elements fashioned by hand in the shape of non pierced breasts (Fig. 2.g, i–j), with a similar parallel for one of

¹⁵ LÓPEZ-GRANDE 2012a: 110–111, Fig. 3; LÓPEZ-GRANDE 2012b: 608–610, fig. 4.a, c.

¹⁶ SEILER 2006: 320, Fig. 3, OZN 93/80 and OZN 93/76; SEILER 2010: 44, fig. 10.3.

¹⁷ BOURRIAU 1982: 78, no. 50; WARMENBOL and HENDRICKX 2009: 98–99, 105, 118, fig. 45.

¹⁸ LÓPEZ-GRANDE 2012a: 111, Fig. 4; LÓPEZ-GRANDE 2012b: 608–610, fig. 4.b.

them (Fig. 2.i) in a fragment from Deir el Bahari.¹⁹ Another fragment from our excavation shows a distinctive surface treatment of the late 17th Dynasty (Fig. 2.i).²⁰ It consists of a shiny finish which is the result of compacting its surface with a round hard object, probably a smooth stone. This fragment shows two rather projecting lumps which seem to be breasts (Fig. 2.g). Beside them there is an eroded nearly circular break indicating the place of other added motifs now lost. Another sherd shows part of an incised wavy line band (Fig. 2.j) whose complete pattern is now lost above the projecting breasts.

Sherds of marl clay slender jars ornamented in the so-called Brown and Red Painted Style²¹ and hence dated to the early and mid-18th Dynasty have also been found. A number of them include incised and/or modelled motifs, some examples combining both different surface treatments. Among these pieces a Marl A4 fragment shows parallel painted lines in black and red, incised wavy and horizontal lines bands, and non-pierced modelled breasts (Fig. 3.a). By reason of its decoration, it seems to be an early example of these decorated slender jars at the time of the early 18th Dynasty. It keeps the incised undulating motif and modelled breasts, ornaments with a long tradition in this pottery type, but adds to its finish the painted lines characteristic of the innovative Brown and Red Painted Style at the time of the early New Kingdom. Another Marl A4 sherd in the same style belongs to the rim and upper part of the neck of a slender decorated jar (Fig. 3.b). The rim is ornamented on its outer surface with a red painted horizontal band. Below it a hand-modelled small human face, probably resembling the face of a goddess, is applied. Her hair is painted in black. Two small knobs of clay are fashioned as her eyes.

More complete but still fragmentary Marl clay slender jars decorated in the Brown and Red Painted Style have also been found. One of them shows a painted black wavy band framed by horizontal red lines, and a third painted line in black (Fig. 3.c). Another one is a Marl A4 jar ornamented with painted horizontal lines in black and red at the base of its neck and a painted band located below its gently modelled shoulders. The band is composed of red and black parallel lines, one of them a black dotted line which suggests a date of the mid-18th Dynasty (Fig. 3.d). This jar also includes two painted vertical lines that can be understood as arms but also as locks of hair going from the broken jar's neck, probably from its modelled rim, to the plain space left on its shoulders between the horizontal painted bands. It also includes two small compact lumps of clay as female breasts, the one on the right side lost now, located at its shoulders. The end of the painted vertical lines curled up around both breasts, as hands holding them, or as ringlets of hair. The neck of this jar might have once included a painted or modelled human face but its fragmentary preservation makes any identification impossible.²² A quite similar jar, including the painted face of the goddess, is known from Dra Abu el-Naga. It was uncovered by the German expedition directed by D. Polz.²³

There is also a sherd from our excavation belonging to a jar of larger size showing an applied compact breast fashioned by hand (Fig. 3.e). Beside the small lump, painted black lines seem to resemble an arm and a hand holding the breast, or a lock of hair curling up around it. The decoration of this fragment incorporates painted floral details including a flower similar to the southern lily, a motif which is known in decorated slender jars of medium and large size dated to the mid-18th Dynasty.²⁴

¹⁹ PINCH 1993: pl. 52.c.

²⁰ SEILER 2010: 49.

²¹ HOPE 1987: *passim*; ARNOLD 1993: 99.

²² LÓPEZ-GRANDE 2012a: 114–115, fig. 5.

²³ SEILER 2006: 318, fig. 2.

²⁴ HOPE 1987: 100–102. pl. XXXVA, fig. 1, XXXVIA–B, fig. 2.

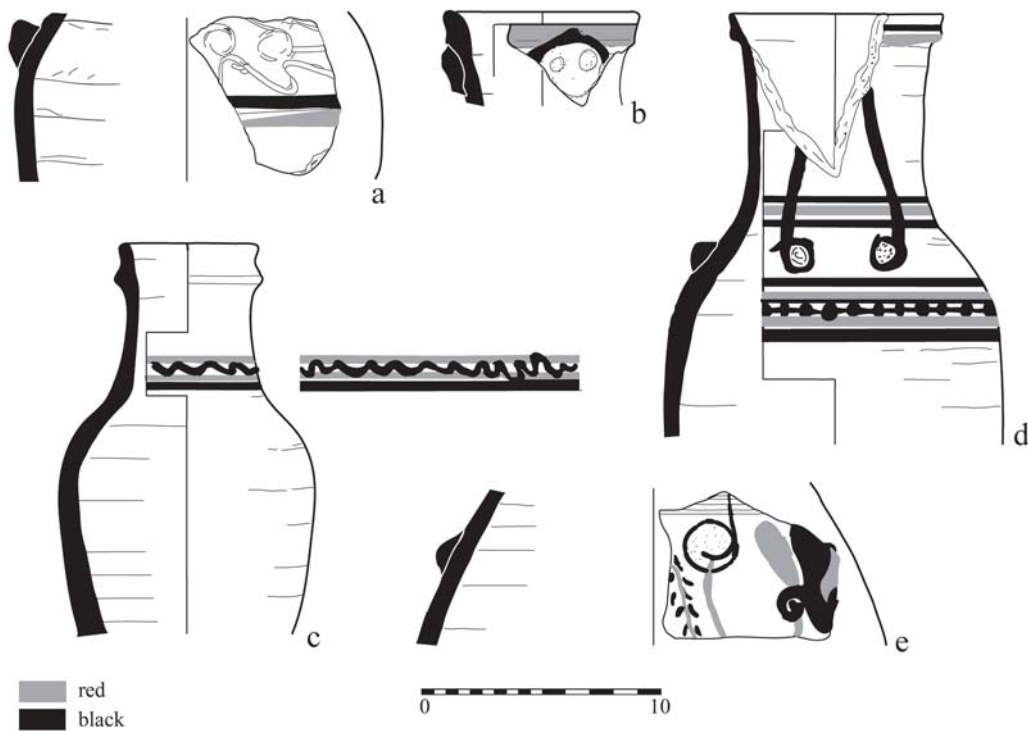


Fig. 3. a) 18F-190-1; b) 210CH-14I12; c) 9z1000S10; d) 10C02-3; e) 9F00-13.

Fragments of at least five Marl A4 slender jars decorated in Brown and Red painted style, and ornamented with applied lumps of clay in the shape of snakes have also been found. Two of these jars show three snakes with raised heads, clearly identified as cobras, added to their necks with the heads of the snakes facing out below the modelled rim of the vases (Fig. 4. a–b). Each cobra's eyes are fashioned in both jars as small rounded knobs, in one of the jars painted in black (Fig. 4.a). Vertical lumps define the cobra's bodies in both jars. The better preserved one shows the cobras bodies ending in a thinner vertical shape at its shoulder, just above a painted band composed of horizontal lines in black and red. Both jars were found in a context of the early–mid 18th Dynasty.²⁵ Three other sherds, two of them belonging to slender jars (Fig. 4.c–d), the third one probably to a sack-shaped jar of larger size, are ornamented with an applied clay knob fashioned as a snake (Fig. 3.e). The three fragments were found together while clearing the uppermost level of the site. They seem to belong to three different jars. Each of them shows the tail of a snake fashioned by hand, added vertically to its outer surface. Those illustrated in Figure 4.c–d, show the end of the snake's body modelled in a wavy shape. Both fragments include a band of lines in black and red painted on their outer surface once the snakes were added to them, as their bodies were also painted with horizontal strokes. The fragment from a bigger sack-shaped jar (Fig. 4.e) shows a vertical, less sinuous snake's tail. Fashioned by hand, it is placed above a decorative band composed of painted horizontal lines in black and red.

Clay modelled snakes applied to the inner surface of open forms are known in ancient Egyptian pottery.²⁶ Lumps of clay fashioned by hand in the shape of cobras and added to the outer surface of the vessels are less common and they are not comparable with those from

²⁵ LÓPEZ-GRANDE and DE GREGORIO: 2009: 33–36, fig. 2.a–b.

²⁶ ASTON 1998: 402; STEVENS 2006: 100–103, 175–176.

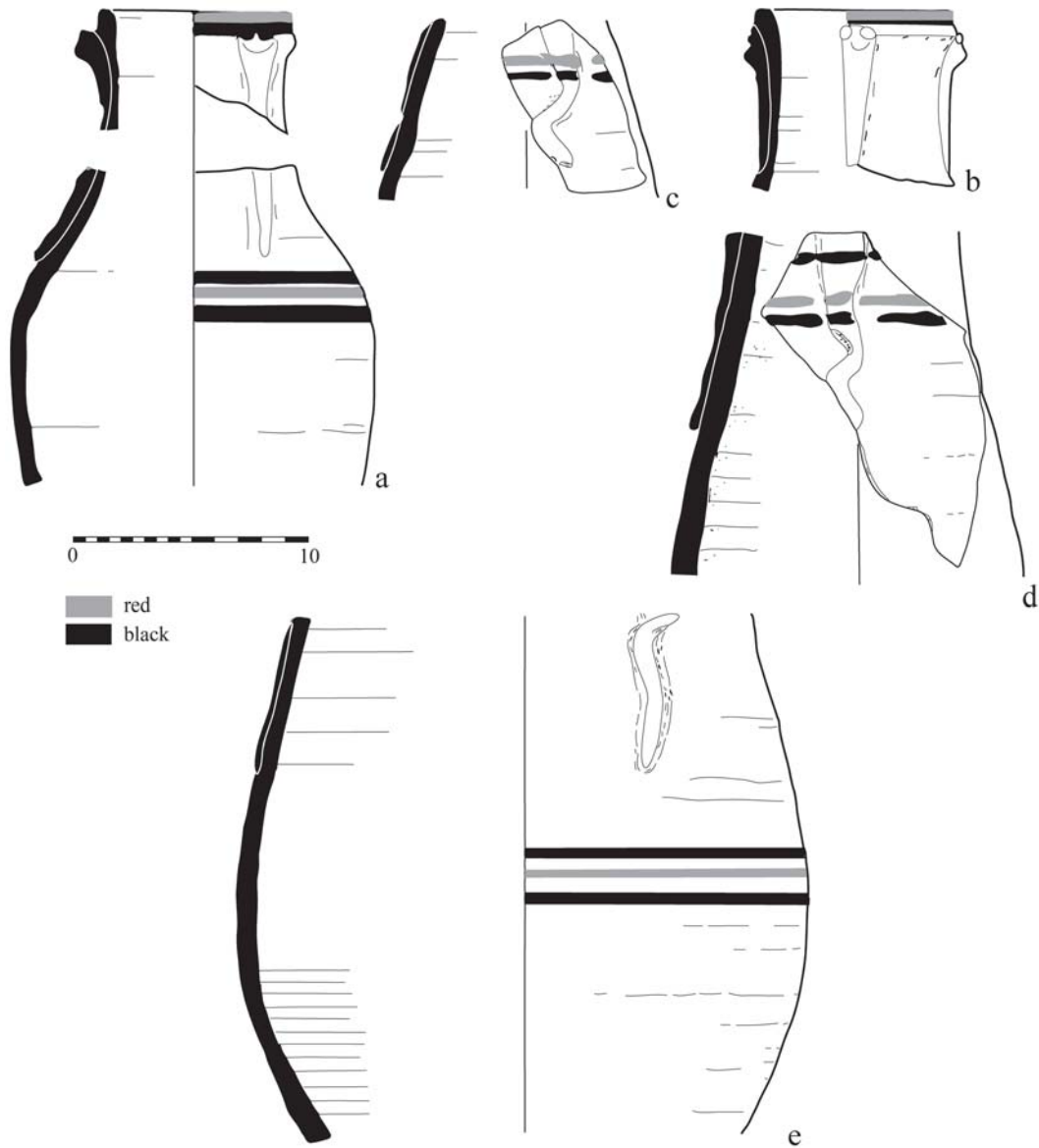


Fig. 4. a) 12G20A 07H05-1; b) 12G20A 07H05-2; c) 17H1000-6; d) 17H1000-7; e) 17H1000-8.

our excavations.²⁷ To my knowledge, there is not any known example of a slender jar dated to the early New Kingdom ornamented with clay cobras added to its outer surface,²⁸ hence the interest of these fragmentary jars and their suggested relation to the notions of motherhood and breastfeeding. Interesting vessels ornamented with snakes fashioned by hand and applied to handles and rims are known from Tell Haror in a context related to the Hyksos Period dated to the 16th century BC.²⁹

²⁷ ROSE and PYKE 2011: 809–828.

²⁸ An example might be identified in a jar's neck from Qubbet el-Hawa: EDEL 2008: 186, 191, fig. 407 26/263.

²⁹ OREN 1997: 264–266, fig. 8.13.

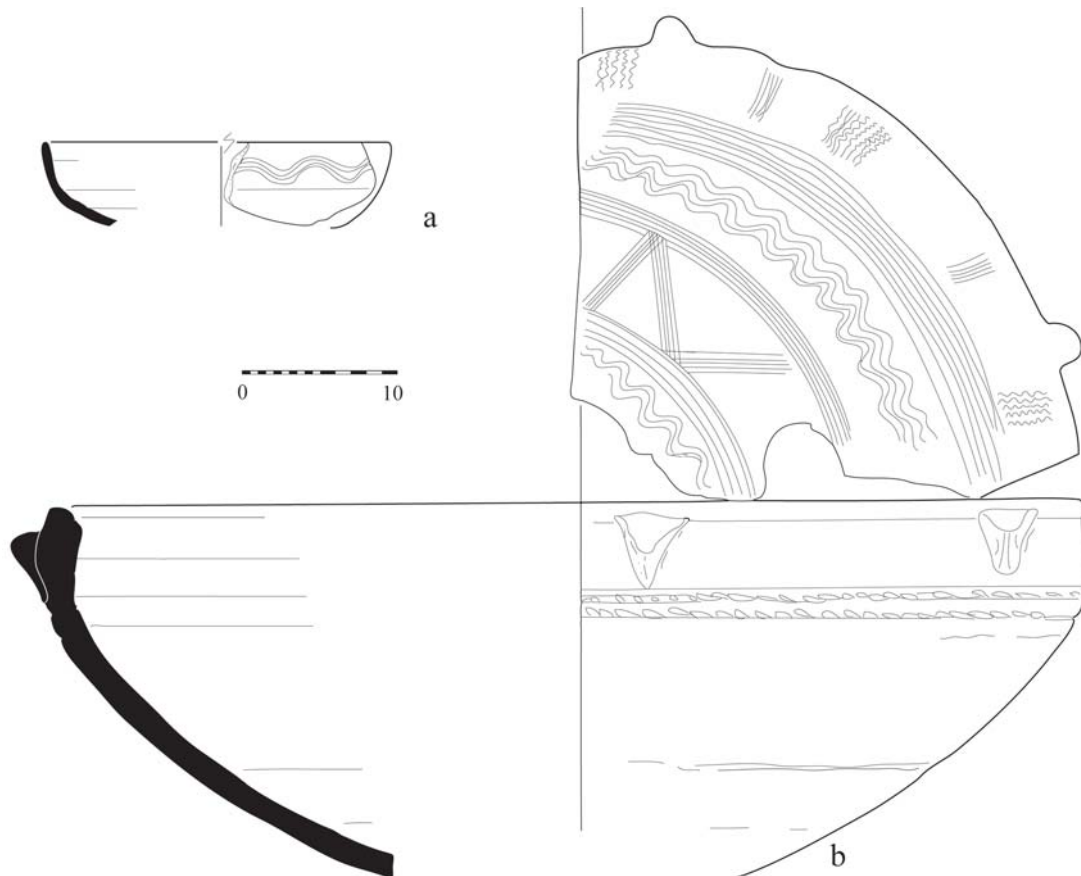


Fig. 5. a) 10G01 C409-3; b) 10D02-1

2.3. Open forms: a bowl and a large plate

Two fragmentary carinated open shapes, a bowl and a large plate, both in Marl A4, decorated with incised wavy lines done when the clay was leather hard, have also been found (Fig. 5.a–b). Both were uncovered associated with decorated slender jars, perhaps for pouring libations into them from the jars.

The fragmentary bowl (Fig. 5.a), ornamented with a wavy band on its outer surface, was found associated with the Second Intermediate Period jar shown in Figure 2.a.³⁰ The carinated large plate (Fig. 5.b) was found in an assemblage of pottery sherds of the Second Intermediate Period/early 18th Dynasty, which included fragments of a jar ornamented with incised lines and plastic lumps of clay (Fig. 2.f). This large plate is decorated on its inner surface with a composite pattern of incised wavy lines. Its outer surface shows raised applied knobs at the rim, and two parallel impressed string lines, probably done by the potter not only as an ornamental detail but as a technical feature to avoid the collapse of the thick walls of the plate while the work was still in progress and the clay still wet. Plates with incised decoration are known in archaeological contexts of the Middle Kingdom, Second Intermediate Period and early 18th Dynasty. One interesting example showing an intricate pattern on its inner surface was found in the undisturbed tomb BE 18 of El-Kab.³¹ The example from our excavation, with a 66.30 cm diameter, is the largest vessel of this kind known to me.

³⁰ LÓPEZ-GRANDE 2012b: 608–610, fig. 4.a, c.

³¹ WARMENBOL and HENDRICKX 2009: 98–99, 105, 118, fig. 45.

3. DECORATIVE MOTIFS. TECHNIQUES, MEANING AND PURPOSE

3.1. Modelled applied decoration motifs

Plastic motifs attested to on mourner or Isis vessels as well as on anthropomorphic slender jars from our excavation could be considered by reason of their meaning in the following groups:

3.1.1. Facial features

Mainly found on mourner vessels (Fig. 1. a–h) but also on slender jars (Fig. 3.b). On the former, faces appear associated with other anatomical details such as arms, hands and breasts. The fragmentary examples from our excavation clearly show facial features and raised hands located at the mouth and upper part of these vessels. Slender jars can include either a face at the rim as an isolated motif, or a face combined with other details. The type may not include a face at all, evoking the goddesses by other elements such as arms, hands and breasts.³²

Faces in both mourner or Isis vessels and slender jars might indicate a particular link between those vessels and protective goddesses such as Isis, Nephthys, Hathor, among others, and their related competencies for helping at the beginning of a new life.

3.1.2. Raised arms, hand or hands in the hair

Raised arms toward the head (Fig. 1.a–h) evoke hands in the hair thereby suggesting hair in motion. Such a gesture, recalled in mourner or Isis vessels, is related to the expression of sorrow and is clearly associated with mourners weeping the loss of the earthly life of the deceased. But it also suggests the erotic movement of the hair performed by mourners in order to wake up the deceased from the deep sleep of death and nourish him then with their milk. The gesture and its related expectations bring to mind the Pyramid Texts spell (1281–1282).³³

“...Isis sits down with her hands on her head, Nephthys has grasped the tips of her breasts because of the death of their brother...” (Pyr. 1281–1282).

Funerary texts insist on the relevance of wet-nurse goddesses gesturing with one hand to one breast as a way of expressing themselves to the deceased, in order to suggest that he could receive milk from that breast. This pose of the goddesses at the time their hair was in motion had an erotic meaning intended to wake up the deceased from death. Once awake, the revived being was nourished by the nutritious food flowing from the breasts the goddesses offered to him with their hands. Those gestures and their purpose are referred to in some spells from the Coffin Texts corpus as can be seen in spell I, 66:³⁴

“... Isis. She shall suckle you, Nephthys shall give you her breast, the Two Ladies of Dept shall let down their hair for you, your two mothers who are in Nekheb shall come to you, they shall take their breasts to your mouth, their shall lift you up and carry you. Recite four times”.

According to Egyptian thinking the dead had to be awoken from death, an event that was comparable with childbirth in the symbolic world of funeral beliefs. It was a critical episode for the newborn being for which the skill in midwifery of the wet-nurse goddesses was

³² SEILER 2006: 319.

³³ FAULKNER 1969: 203.

³⁴ FAULKNER 1994: 61.

required. The awakening had to happen before the burial, and the rituals performed at the threshold of the tomb were intended to achieve this particular purpose: the rebirth of the deceased, to wake him up to a new type of existence, raising him to a sanctified status. To achieve these expectations the so-called *Ritual of the Opening of the Mouth* was performed,³⁵ as a remembrance of the birth of a newborn baby.

Literary sources give more than enough evidence related to the special links of two goddesses, Isis and Nephthys, with the occasion of birth. Both were regarded as protective deities particularly competent in the process of childbirth and so they were recognised as efficient midwives. Such a role, well specified in the tale of the birth of the royal children (Berlin Papyrus 3033),³⁶ seems to be alluded to on pottery vessels that connected them not only with the notions of mourning and breastfeeding but also with the idea of midwifery. As such it was an important role of both goddesses, a required skill for the process of bringing back the dead to life as new-born child.

3.1.3. *Breasts, hand holding a breast*

Motifs such as breasts in general and a breast in a hand, clearly evoke breast-feeding and therefore motherhood.³⁷ For both images, isolated breasts (Fig. 2.e, g, i–j; Fig. 3.a), but mainly for that of a hand cupped around a breast (Fig. 2. b–c, f, h), it is important to bear in mind that it is not only the idea of nourishing with milk that is being communicated (for example when the nipple is pressed with the fingers (Fig. 2.b)). Rather an erotic pose could also be expressed when the breast is raised and shown as it was offered with erotic intent (Fig. 2.c, f).

3.1.4. *Snakes*

The motif in the shape of poisonous cobras attested to on several vessels from our excavation could be seen as rather odd in the world of motherhood and breast-feeding. However, we have to bear in mind the role of the goddesses Renenutet and Meretseger as wet-nurses. Importantly, both were also closely associated with snakes, as can be seen in iconographic and written sources, and both were strongly linked to the Theban necropolis. There are certain additional details that allow one to relate the snake shaped plastic decoration of these vessels particularly with Renenutet. In the first place, Renenutet was a popular goddess in the Theban area and its necropolis at the time of the early 18th Dynasty.³⁸ Secondly, the Egyptian name of this goddess *rnnwtt*³⁹ might derive from the root of the verb *rnn*⁴⁰ whose meaning is “to nourish”, followed by the word *wtt*, which means “snake”.⁴¹ So the complete name of the goddess might have the meaning of “the snake, she who nourishes”. In the light of this, the vessels from Dra Abu el-Naga ornamented with snakes should be related to the cult of this goddess, specifically Renenutet in her function as a wet-nurse.

Meretseger, the second goddess mentioned, was also identified as a snake and associated with the desert hills of the Theban area.⁴² However, her role as a wet-nurse goddess seems to

³⁵ ASSMAN 2003: 53–60.

³⁶ LICHTHEIM 1984: 220–222; SIMPSON 2003: 13.

³⁷ BOURRIAU 1982: 78, no 50; SEILER 2006: 317–327.

³⁸ BROEKHUIS 1971: *passim*; BEINLICH-SEEBER 1984: 232–236.

³⁹ ERMAN and GRAPOW 1982: II, 437, 3.

⁴⁰ ERMAN and GRAPOW 1982: II, 436, 3.

⁴¹ ERMAN and GRAPOW 1982: I, 378, 4; SATZINGER 1983: 239–240.

⁴² BRUYÈRE 1930: 105–122.

have been less predominant than that of Renenutet, at least at the time of the early–mid 18th Dynasty. Meretseger was worshiped in the Theban area but mainly in the late New Kingdom and the early Third Intermediate Period (21st Dynasty). Moreover, she was especially known as a punitive goddess who punished criminals with blindness.⁴³ Because of this evidence and the fact that these jars' shape, fabric and painted decoration, implies a date in the early–mid 18th Dynasty, I am more inclined to suggest that they depict Renenutet instead of Meretseger.

3.2. Incised and painted wavy line patterns

It is noteworthy that wavy line patterns are a recurrent feature of the vessels we are dealing with. The motif was used in them not only as a decorative means but as a special design that in these particular vessels goes beyond an ornamental purpose. It might have been added to these ceramics in order to recall specific gestures and movements which had a special role in the funerary ceremonies, as will be explained in the following pages.

3.2.1. *Incised wavy line patterns: the motif and its origins*

The motif itself consists of undulating lines made on the leather-hard clay surface of a vessel. It was executed with a comb-like instrument or a sharp-edged tool such as a fish-bone, piece of wood, shell, or something similar, moved horizontally and at the same time up and down to produce a number of parallel wavy lines. The technique can vary considerably in sophistication, in the type of incision made, and in their sharpness. In a number of examples the precise technique is not always identifiable from the motif.

In relation to their origins and development, wavy line patterns can be understood as part of the African heritage of ancient Egypt. The patterns are widely attested in painted decoration of open and closed pottery shapes dated to Nagada I, and in painted and white-filled incised motifs of Nagada II pots. In both periods the undulating lines probably suggested water. These Upper Egyptian Predynastic vessels seem to have been inspired by Nubian types⁴⁴ which are clearly related to the African heritage of ancient Egyptian culture. It has been suggested that the incised wavy line design and related technique had its origins in the region of Central Sudan and Western Ethiopia, the best-watered region of all the Saharan-Sahelian 'aquatic' complex extension. The undulating lines might be applied to pottery in that region as an evocation of water.⁴⁵ Wavy line patterns became very common pottery surface treatments used through prehistory in Mesolithic and Neolithic sites ranging in time from the 8th to the 3rd millennium B.C. from numerous localities along the main Nile as well as in the Blue Nile and in the White Nile. These pottery surface treatments appear in association with a lakeside economy based upon aquatic mammals and fish, covering the area from the Red Sea to Mauritania, across the so-called Sahara-Sahel Belt.⁴⁶

Dynastic pottery does not include this specific motif (or any other decorative patterns for that matter) till the late First Intermediate Period. At that time, incised undulating motifs among other designs such as rhombi, squares and triangles, straight and zigzag lines running horizontally and vertically, and their related techniques, reappeared in the Theban region. These decorative motifs possibly appeared once more as a result of the influence of Nubian pottery, especially from that of the Nubian C-Group, whose decorative patterns goes back to

⁴³ VALBELLE 1982: 79.

⁴⁴ RZEUSKA 2010: 404

⁴⁵ FERNÁNDEZ 2007: 71–73.

⁴⁶ MOHAMMED ALI and KHABIR 2003: 33–35.

the Neolithic.⁴⁷ Possibly inspired by these Nubian ceramics, Egyptian workshops of the Theban area began to sporadically include incised wavy line bands on certain pots at this time, but it was first during the Middle Kingdom that incised wavy line bands shyly appear as decorative motifs in a more regular way. Nevertheless, it would be in the Second Intermediate Period, at the time of the 17th Dynasty⁴⁸ that a taste for incised decorations with both horizontal and wavy patterns is clearly developed as a pottery surface treatment in the Theban area. Wavy line patterns still occur in vessels dated to the early-mid 18th Dynasty in incised, but also in painted bands, in the so-called Brown and Red Painted Style (Fig. 3.a, c).

Incised wavy line patterns of the vessels dated from the late Second Intermediate Period to the early 18th Dynasty from our excavation show variations of style and execution technique. According to the shape of the waves and to the pressure exerted while they were executed, four different styles can be identified: 1) Classical undulating waves, with neatly incised regular curvy waves (Fig. 1.b; Fig. 2.d, e; Fig. 3.a; Fig. 5.a); 2) Angular waves, with rather blurred distorted waves tending to an angular shape (Fig. 2.a); 3) Soft waves, with scarcely incised waves arranged in discontinuous bands (Fig. 2.b) or in arched rather than wavy bands (Fig. 2.h), and 4) composite waves, with well defined incised lines combining a variety of geometric bands such as straight, zigzagging and undulating lines (Fig. 2.f; Fig. 5. b). All of them seem to have been executed in a similar way, dragging a sharp-edged tool or a toothed instrument over the leather-hard surface of the vessels. The strength applied to the incision varies from one model to another, with at least three degrees of sharpness that should be considered as gentle, medium and very sharp. Wavelength and wave-shape differ in each style too, from open or continuous lines (in Classical and Composite styles) to cut waves (in Angular and some examples of Soft style). Alongside these incised decorated examples, some of them exhibiting at the same time applied plastic decoration, a slender jar enhanced with a band in the Brown and Red Painted Style, must be considered (Fig. 3.c). Though painted, this ornamental band fits in with the Classical undulating waves style, while its range of colour make this jar a slightly later version of the type in use during the late Second Intermediate Period, datable to the early–mid 18th Dynasty.

It is not clear if the diversity summarized in these four wavy line patterns styles indicates products from different workshops, a chronological development of the vessels or a specific use of them. Ceramics ornamented with undulating patterns from our excavation do not constitute a representative sample as some of the described styles are identified on only a single item. Vessels of this kind might be highly represented in cemeteries of the Theban area at the time of the 17th and early–mid 18th Dynasty, but further investigation into the subject has to be done.

3.2.2. *Incised wavy lines: a motif which should recall a gesture*

Finally I would like to move on to the related meanings of this design in funerary pottery vessels. Incised or painted wavy line patterns allow several interpretations.

For one thing, the undulating design should evoke some liquid inside the pot, for example water or milk, and express the idea that the liquid was stirring around inside the vessel, ready to stir up the deceased. Water and milk were used during the funerary procession that accompanied the mummy to the necropolis, as it can be seen in numerous funerary scenes.⁴⁹ While

⁴⁷ RZEUSKA 2010: 404–405.

⁴⁸ SEILER 2010: 44, 49.

⁴⁹ PORTER and MOSS 1962: V, 183, Tomb of Renni, El-Kab, no. 7; PORTER and MOSS 1960: I, 165, TT 82, Amenehet; 262, TT 154, Tati; 339, TT 255, Roy, among others.

this parade was in progress water or milk was poured over and in front of the sledge which held the coffin. This act had a practical meaning: it gives a more slippery surface to the track and makes easier the dragging of the sledge; but it also could have had a symbolic meaning. For one thing, when water was used, it could have evoked the watery fluid that flows from every mother as a precursor to childbirth while the use of milk could have evoked the idea of breastfeeding and the need of such a nutritious food for the well-being of the deceased. Iconographic sources show that the vessel used in these scenes is mainly the so-called *hes-vase*, but water or milk could be carried in other specific jars and poured into the *hes-vase* when it was required.

A second meaning could have been the wavy line patterns as the goddesses' hair in motion, recalling the assistance of the wet-nurse goddesses in the awakening of the deceased, as well as their feeling of sorrow. According to ancient Egyptians beliefs, hair was of great significance in the context of burials.⁵⁰ Goddesses' hair in motion and its required movement prescribed by certain rituals should also be evoked by the wavy line patterns attested in these vessels. It is important to remember that according to Egyptian thinking, hair is full of vital energy and the energy of divine hair needs to be transferred from the goddesses to the deceased making his rebirth easier. The great significance of hair, the movements done with it by mourners and even the offering of some special locks to the dead are well attested in written sources, iconographic scenes and also in archaeological finds.⁵¹ It is also noteworthy to point out that for hair and locks there is a specific hieroglyphic sign which includes several curly locks.⁵² Some of them, arranged in a horizontal band, give a pattern similar to that of the wavy line of our vessels. To summarise, this motif could be a symbolic reference to the mourners' hair in motion, at the same time that the motif could evoke the nutritious liquid given by the goddesses, milk, or even evoke the watery fluid that flows from every mother before childbirth.

A third meaning is related to the feeling of sorrow of the mourners. This is a well known role for Isis and Nephthys as devoted sisters of Osiris, widely attested in funerary texts as well as in the so-called *Ritual of the Opening of the Mouth*. During the performance of this ritual, two women, former participants in the mourners cortège leave their companions to join the priests' group who are to perform the ritual. Then, these two women personified and emulated the actions of the goddesses Isis and Nephthys who, according to Egyptian beliefs, were deeply involved in the process of the rebirth of Osiris into a new life after his death.

According to written and iconographic sources, Isis and Nephthys in their role as mourners of the deceased, made some specific movements with their hair which was shaken, placed over their faces and spread out, doing what has been called the ritual movement *nwn*.⁵³ All these movements, mainly done with the locks of hair above both temples close to the forehead, were performed in order to express sorrow or grief but also in order to excite and wake up the deceased. The design of the undulating lines added to these vessels is quite similar to that of the hair.

⁵⁰ VALDESOGO 2005: 14–19.

⁵¹ LÓPEZ-GRANDE and DE GREGORIO 2007: 153–154.

⁵² ERMAN and GRAPOW 1982: IV, 122, 1.

⁵³ ERMAN and GRAPOW 1982: II, 222, 5.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The implications of this paper must be understood in the context of the ancient Egyptian cemeteries, especially those of the Theban area ranging from the late First Intermediate Period to the early New Kingdom. It focuses on the study of a particular group of pottery and reveals the meaning of wet-nurse goddesses such as Isis, Nephthys, Hathor, and Renenutet in funerary concepts. This study also notes that wet-nurse goddesses' competencies go beyond that of giving mother's milk and are related to the concepts of mourning and midwifery.

The pottery shapes involved include specific types of closed forms such as mourning or Isis vessels and decorated slender jars, as well as open forms including a large plate and a bowl. The most remarkable peculiarity of these ceramics is their ornamental motifs, which can be applied, incised or painted. Those fashioned in the shape of faces link these vessels with the idea of protective goddesses, a thought that also could be communicated through the representation of other anatomical details, such as arms, hands and breasts. The representation of the latter, isolated but also held in a hand, reveal a clear connection between these vessels with wet-nurse goddesses and the related notions of motherhood and breastfeeding. Breasts also recall erotic gestures made by some wet-nurse goddesses in their insistence on exciting the deceased, waking him up from death and bringing him to life. This is a task which seems to be similar to that done by a midwife on a motionless newborn baby once the labor is over, and brings to mind the role of the goddesses Isis and Nephthys as competent midwives attested to in iconographic and written sources.

Lumps of clay in the shape of rearing cobras added to the outer surface of slender jars' rims and necks probably evoke the wet-nurse goddess Renenutet, and the related notions of mother's milk, motherhood and breastfeeding.

Ornamental motifs sculptured as raised arms, show a clear link with the concept of sorrow associated with Isis and Nephthys in their role as mourner goddesses. Raised arms also evoke erotic gestures involving movements of the hair recalling the same time the idea of exciting the dead to wake him up from the death, and the concept of midwifery, a task related to Isis and Nephthys as skilled midwives.

Undulating wavy line patterns must be understood in these vessels as an evocation to the goddesses' hair in motion and its erotic implications in the world of the funerary rituals.⁵⁴ The undulating lines should also be taken as an indication of liquids stirring inside the pots, probably water or milk, and their related implications in the world of the wet-nurse goddesses. Water inside these pots could have evoked the watery fluid that flows from every mother as a precursor to childbirth. Milk could have recalled the idea of breastfeeding and the need of such a nutritious food for the well-being of the deceased. Either water or milk should be kept in the closed shaped vessels of both types, mourner-vessels and decorated slender jar, and even they should be poured from them onto a large plate as a ritual offering, or served in a bowl to be drunk in the course of any specific ceremony.

The open forms in the studied pottery group, a large plate and a bowl, should be use in relation to these practices. Both present incised undulating decoration, the large plate a composite style design in its inner surface, the bowl a classical style motif in its outer surface, probably evoking particular liquids and their related meaning in funerary context.

Summing up, funerary vessels with the peculiar decoration taken into account in this study might have had an important role as magical artifacts used in ceremonies offered to the deceased, performed at the time of their burials or later in order to assist them in attaining

⁵⁴ LÓPEZ-GRANDE and DE GREGORIO 2007: 153–155.

eternal life. These vessels could be used during the funerary procession that accompanied the mummy to the necropolis as well as in the course of the performance of the *Ritual of the Opening of the Mouth*. After the burial, vessels of the kind should be used as milk containers in occasional offerings presented to the deceased, or to keep or to pour out water, to recall the watery fluids that take place in advance of any childbirth.

The deceased had to be reborn to a new life. He needed to be assisted by skilled midwives. He had to wake up from the sleep of death, and then he must be nourished with milk. The hands, the breasts, the milk and the hair of wet-nurse goddesses should help him.

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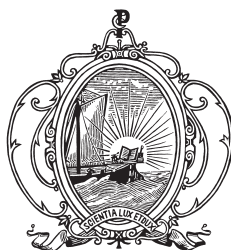
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