Studien zur altägyptischen Keramik

HERAUSGEGEBEN

VON

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The Mendes – Al-Hiba System of Pottery Classification

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I. Our Goal:

The construction of a system of classification sufficiently flexible to record true pottery types and the range of variation in each. Such a system, we felt, must enable us to make fuller use of the interpretive value of our pottery by a competent rough-sorting in the field geared to a technical analysis, by qualified scientists, of representative samples in the laboratory.

II. Type:

For our purposes, we defined a true type as an assemblage of pottery which exhibits group entities in shape, style and technique of decoration, material composition and technology; or which exhibits group entities in function.

At the beginning we believed that we might find a significant conjunction between these two typologies, but also realized that a typology based on function was dependent upon the discovery of pottery: 1) in clearly defined archaeological contexts where the use of each pot was definitely indicated, 2) in ancient textual references where the function of the pot was clearly stated and the pot described with sufficient precision to allow us to accurately identify it. The lack of precise textual descriptions, the limited appearance of pottery in representational scenes, the vast amount of careful archaeological data needed for accurate identification of the function of each kind of pot, and the indication that a single piece of pottery might well have served several dissimilar functions in the past, as it often does today, convinced us that the construction of a typology based on function was a very long range project indeed. It was clear, however, that the system of classification used for the organization of the pot sherds must be sufficiently flexible to permit eventual reclassification, restudy of the specific archaeological context from which each sherd came, and a statistical analysis of the sherds, level by level and unit by unit, based on their functional aspects.

Since a functional typology was not immediately possible, we organized our sherds in a formal typology. Traditional, formal pottery typologies often concentrate on shape, style and technique of decoration. We were convinced that the material composition of the pot and the technology that produced it could be equally important from a chronological and functional point of view. Seriation of sherds in a clearly defined series of levels from the fourth, fifth, and sixth century A. D. at Sirmium in Yugoslavia has clearly shown that fabric and technology were often more accurate and responsive chronological indicators than form and decoration. In addition, studies of modern pottery production in Yugoslavia, Egypt and Iraq show that types of clays, treatment of clays, various kinds of temper, and in some cases degree and length of firing were often carefully chosen on the basis of the function of the finished product. Although we could not know if such factors had always been equally decisive, it was clear that they were as much a part of a formal typology as shape and decoration.

III. System of Classification:

In devising a formal system of classification for field use, we were faced with several difficult problems. Each day's excavation could produce pottery from several contexts and more than one level, and a particular level or specific context could continue to yield pottery over a period of days or even weeks. Our system of classification must allow us to easily restore a particular level or context in its

entirety. Secondly, at the beginning, and perhaps for sometime thereafter, we would not be able to clearly distinguish in all cases between differences in technology and differences in material composition. For instance, a sherd with »sandy fabric« might be the result of the purposeful use of sand as temper or might be the result of the use of a sand-filled clay. Until such time as we could establish the exact nature of the differences between sherds, each apparent difference must be carefully recorded as an observable variation. Thirdly, we had no idea of what comprised a culturally significant variation in shape, decoration or apparent differences in technology or material composition. Nor did we know what fell within the range of culturally permissible variation, such as the difference in a pottery type which resulted from its manufacture by two or more potters, or differences unintentionally introduced by a single potter during the course of a long day's work. In other words, we had no way in advance of our collection of data to determine the true type, the cluster of permissible variation around it, and to sort out the anomalies resulting from accidents in the collection of raw material or the manufactoring process. Whatever system of classification was used, it had to be sufficiently flexible to permit substantial modifications in the light of additional knowledge.

Two possibilities suggested themselves. One could set up temporary formal types to represent every possible variation in our material, but this would result in a proliferation of temporary types too cumbersome for easy use. For instance, twelve variants of a single shape, each of which appeared in three apparently different fabrics with two kinds of decoration would require the archaeologist to make 72 comparisons to determine which temporary type corresponded to the sherd he was trying to classify. On the other hand, one could establish three seperate temporary typologies, one for each category, which would result in the need for only 17 comparisons: twelve for shape, three for fabric, and two for decoration. We chose the latter system because we were convinced that the fewer the number of comparisons our archaeologists had to make, the greater the accuracy in identification we could expect from them. It was also clear that this system was flexible enough for our purposes, and that at the end of our project data from all three temporary typologies could be easily combined to yield a true formal typology.

Our temporary typological references consisted of selected sherds and pots arranged on long tables for easy use and observation. The temporary shape typology was composed of groups of sherds and pots arranged in such categories as: conical bowls, high-necked jars, folded bases, beveled rims, etc. Each temporary shape type was fully described on a temporary shape type sheet, given a number and drawn to scale. As the excavations continued, the examples originally chosen were regularly replaced with larger and more complete examples of the same temporary type. Our ultimate objective in replacement was to have a profile or complete example of each temporary type available for typological reference.

The temporary fabric typology, which we hoped would eventually reflect specific differences in certain aspects of technology and in material composition, was composed of a seperate group of sherds carefully chosen on the basis of microscopic examination of their general structure and the nature of their inorganic inclusions, comparison to the Munsell soil color charts, and hardness of the sherd. This preliminary examination indicated that the overwhelming majority of our sherds could be represented by a few temporary fabric types which were designated by letters. Divisions in each category were made on the basis of inclusion size (fine, medium, coarse) and when present, the size and kind (chaff, manure, pappus, reed) of organic material used as a temper. Technical treatment of the sherd's surface and its general condition were included in the temporary shape typology as evidence showed that these factors varied with the shape and function of the finished pot.

The scheme of decoration and the technical means by which it was produced were recorded on a third temporary type sheet. Recording of this information was greatly aided by the many studies of pottery decoration, but it seemed likely that a typological cluster of variations could vary from potter to potter and from site to site. We therefore thought it better to laboriously follow the same general process as in our temporary shape typology in an attempt to determine »true types« of decorative treatment and the cluster of culturally permissible variations around them for our particular sites, rather than adopt the many admirable decorative typologies based on analysis of material from other places.

IV. The Process of Recording:

Each level, area, room, feature, and other archaeologically justified division was collected, washed and recorded separately. A recording sheet (Table 4) was filled out for each and consisted of: 1) the date of excavation, 2) an exact description of the find spot (area, coordinates, level, room number and feature), 3) a statement of special archaeological circumstances or associations, 4) a statistical classification of all non-diagnostic body sherds according to the temporary fabric typology, 5) a statistical classification of diagnostic sherds without rims or bases, 6) a statistical classification of rims, bases and profiles including measurements, 7) a full description of sherds which did not fit the typologies displayed at the time when the recording was in progress. Each sherd which did not fit the temporary typologies was carefully labeled with date of find and exact findspot, and placed in boxes situated behind each category of temporary types for this purpose. These boxes were carefully examined at regular intervals. When several examples of the same variation were discovered, a new temporary type was created. The nature of single variants and anomalies was carefully recorded. Seperate boxes were also assigned for sherds of uncertain fabric, shape or decoration. The archaeologists were instructed to place a sherd in this appropriate box if they had the smallest doubt as to its prober classification. Special boxes at al-Hiba for very lightly fired material and for unfired pots and interesting lumps of clay were very rewarding. They revealed a remarkable range of sun-dried mud vessels and other objects in use in the Early Dynastic period.

Until such time as we had clear evidence to the contrary, we operated on the supposition that minor variation in our temporary typologies could be culturally significant. When, in specific instances, clear information to the contrary was forthcoming, we could and did combine two or more temporary types into one. New kinds of material found in several examples in the excavations were added immediately to the appropriate temporary typology or typologies.

Statistical information collected should enable us to reconstruct the number of whole pots of each type represented in every specific archaeological context. Such information for all the periods represented on a site will allow us to speak more accurately of trends in technology, shape and decoration than if we were to rely on simple counts of diagnostic fragments, as the number of sherds into which a pot is broken is largely an accident of fate.

To make certain that there was sufficient uniformity in the recording of the material, spot checks were made from time to time and the complete finds from particular rooms or features were occasionally first done by the archaeologist and then set aside for sherd by sherd checking. An additional control was provided by the comparison of detailed scientific analysis of several rooms and features with the results obtained by archaeologists using our typological system.

Table 1: Temporary Shape Type

Field number	Period	Findspot	Neg. no.	Whole
Date of finding			drawn	Fragment
			disposition	Reconstructable
Height	Form		Made by:	Utility Ware
Diameter				Fine Ware
Rim	Rim		Hand	Poorly made
Body				Fairly well
Base	Lip		Wheel	Well
Normal thickness				Very Well
	Handle		Template	
Special Measurements				
	Base Foot			
Fabric Type ———			Smooth	Luster
			Rough	matte
Special Description			Grainy	low
				medium
				high

Observations on Pot Forming	*Treatment*	*Surface Condition*
	None	Even
	Wet-smoothed	Uneven
	Self-slipped	Smeared
	True slip	Puddled
	»White Surface«	Pitted
	Polished	Abrasing
	Painted	Crazing
		Spalling
		Scored

Decoration Type ———

Potter's Mark

Remarks and Bibliography

Table 2: Temporary Fabric Type

Inclusions:

Name	Color	Structure	Size	Density

Special Description of Organic Temper

Color: *Hardness:*

    Paste: Surface:

      Core   Interior

      Borders   Exterior

Subjective Observations:

    Granular

    Laminated   Heavily fired   Coarse

    Dense   Moderately fired   Medium

    Friable   Lightly fired   Fine

Remarks:

Shapes in Which it Occurs:

Table 3: Temporary Decoration Type

Pattern:

Technique:

Raw Materials:

Shapes on Which it Occurs:

Remarks and Bibliography:

Table 4: Recording Sheet

No. of Pages	Date	Area	Coordinates		Locus	Level

Page No.	Feature and Location		Fieldbook page

1. Statistics

	Profiles	Rims	Necks	Shlders	Bellies	Bases	Handles	Spouts	Indist.	Fab.	Treatment Int.	Treatment Ext.	Dec.

2. Profiles

	Type	Diam.	Pres. Ht	Recognizable Form					

3. Bases

4. Rims

5. Handles, Spouts

6. Striking Variants, New Types

Characterization of Assemblage

Comments   Initials