Naukratis: Greeks in Egypt

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Offering spoons

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‘Offering spoons’, more commonly referred to as cosmetic dishes or toilet spoons, are sophisticated objects already attested in the Early Dynastic Period (3100–2686 BC), even possibly in the Badarian Culture (c. 4400–4000 BC). Their production persists well into the Saite Period (or 26th dynasty: 664–525 BC) (chronotopology in Wallert 1967, 5–48). At Naukratis, they represent a small but coherent group of Egyptian finds that can probably be dated to the 26th dynasty. The spoons come in a variety of shapes and three different versions are known at Naukratis.

1. Shapes

The most common shape consists of an open hand holding a mussel-shaped scoop. This type is already attested in the Old Kingdom and is especially popular during the New Kingdom; archaising copies were produced during the Late Period (Wallert 1967, 37–8; on the evolution of this specific type after the New Kingdom see Bulté 2008a, 1–4, pls I–II; Bulté 2008b, 27–9, figs 3–9). Four spoons from Naukratis (Boston, Museum of Fine Arts 88.1047; British Museum 1888,0601.75; Oxford, Ashmolean Museum AN1896-1908-G.113; Cairo, Egyptian Museum JE33549), all made from bone, belong to this category (Fig. 1). One of them is unfinished (Oxford, Ashmolean Museum AN1896-1908-G.113), thus suggesting that some of these spoons were locally produced.

The second type features bound bovids. Zoomorphic offering spoons of this type were produced as early as the New Kingdom (Bulté 2008a, 9). Two specimens from Naukratis are known (British Museum 1888,0601.76; British Museum 1888,0601.72) and have been published (Gardner 1888, 87, pl. XVII no. 10, pl. XIX no. 8). Only the complete one representing a bound oryx has been located so far. It is made of dark green schist (Fig. 2), but similar examples are known made out of bone, ivory and glazed composition or Egyptian Blue (Bulté 2008a, 9, pl. VI; bound oryx in faience dated to the 18th dynasty: Schneider 1999, 46–7).
A variant of this latter type is represented by a fragmentary spoon depicting a kneeling female figure raising up her hands (Gardner 1888, 58, pl. XIV no. 2) and wearing a striped garment (very similar incomplete offering spoons in slate: from Memphis, Anthes 1965, 102, pl. 38c–d, no. 50; from Egypt British Museum EA36134 (Fig. 3). This iconography finds some parallels in Saite-Persian offering spoons that represent offering bearers holding scoops in the shape of a bound bovid (for a better preserved example from Sais, dated to the Persian period, see Wallert 1967, 45, pl. 39, no. K20). However, the general theme of the offering bearer, often depicted as a foreigner, is already attested on New Kingdom offering spoons (Bulté 2008a, 7–8, pl. V).

Figure 3 Offering spoon figuring an offering bearer (from Egypt), British Museum, EA36134

2. Nature and function

The nature and function of these objects remains much debated (see Bulté 2008a, 11–14, for a synthesis and references). Some scholars have interpreted them as make-up or unguent spoons for personal use. Others believed they were used to present perfumes to a deity (Yoyotte 1994–5, 674). Interestingly, the analysis of 400 spoons by Ingrid Wallert revealed no trace of unguent or make up (Gamer-Wallert 1980). They were not liturgical objects, either, as they were rarely found in temple deposits.

The iconographical analysis undertaken by Jeanne Bulté (in 2008a and 2008b) demonstrated that these spoons should be seen as offerings. Indeed, the major themes represented on them are linked to offerings, such as the bound oryx (Fig. 2), or to the act of offering, such as the open hand holding a shell or the offering bearer (Fig. 1). Bulté also perceived
them as lavish gifts to bring good luck. These gifts were exchanged between members of the elite during certain festivities, such as the New Year festival, as a way to wish good health and prosperity. The association with this festival is supported by specimens in which the scoop is shaped like a New Year's flask or others with the usual inscription wishing a Happy New Year (Wallert 1967, 92, pl. 38, no. H10; Bulté 2008b, 31–2, fig. 14).

Deities linked with child birth such as Hathor, Bes, Harpokrates and Khnum are also commonly associated with these spoons (Bulté 2008b, 33, figs 6, 8 and 14). They can be represented (Fig. 4), or mentioned in inscriptions (for references to the gods Harpokrates and Khnum on an offering spoon of the 26th dynasty from Tanis, see Bulté 2008b, fig. 8). The spoons also therefore carry ideas of fecundity, fertility and regeneration.

3. Contexts of discovery

During the late Third Intermediate and Late Periods, offering spoons appeared in a wide range of contexts, including settlements. At Karnak, hand and shell type offering spoons were discovered in a residential quarter for priests in the temple of Amun in Karnak, within a sealed context of the late 26th to early 27th dynasties (Masson 2007, 605, pl. XXIX) (Fig. 5).

Placed in tombs, offering spoons truly became symbols of regeneration. The tomb of Padihorresnet (Tomb TT196, located in the necropolis of El-Assasif in Thebes), the chief steward of Amun during the 26th dynasty, yielded an offering spoon in the shape of a Tilapia fish (Graefe 2003, 168, pl. 85, no. 328). This fish is associated with the idea of rebirth and often represented on offering spoons (Bulté 2008a, 10, pl. VII). Examples of offering spoons were also discovered in the royal necropolis of El-Kurru and Sanam in Sudan. One, in the shape of a girl swimming, was found in the tomb of the wife of the Kushite King Taharqa at El-Kurru (Dunham 1950, 27, pl. LIX.h–i). Such swimmer-shaped offering spoons were a very popular type from the New Kingdom onwards (Bulté 2008a, 4–5, pl. III; Bulté 2008b, 26). These examples show how these objects were often associated with social elites.

Offering spoons were also offered as votive gifts in temples or chapels. This was the case for two of the Naukratite specimens (Masson forthcoming b). The first (Oxford, Ashmolean Museum AN1896-1908-G.113), described as a hand in bone in Hogarth’s excavation diary of 1903 (p. 17, entry for Saturday 2 May), was found amongst a wide range of Egyptian votive offerings in a small building that Hogarth identified as a ‘small shrine of some Eg[yp]tian god’, in the north-west corner of the enclosure wall of the Great Temenos. Interestingly, this hand was either left unfinished or very crudely made. The other example is of the type of the ‘offering bearer’ (Gardner 1888, pl. XIV no. 2). It was found in the Greek sanctuary of Aphrodite (Gardner 1888, 58; Yoyotte 1994/95, 674).

Even though offering spoons occur in Upper Egypt and Sudan, they are more frequently found in the Delta, including at sites such as Bubastis, Tanis, Zagazig, Sais, Saqqara and Memphis (list in Wallert 1967, 53). The
deities mentioned or represented on them were also particularly revered in the Delta, especially Bastet, Bes, Harpokrates and Khnum (Bulté 2008b, 33). They clearly belong to a long Egyptian tradition closely related to traditional beliefs and rituals of fertility, fecundity and regeneration. As seen previously, they are also linked to certain social classes, such as sacerdotal classes and royal entourage.

In Naukratis, they might attest a certain degree of interaction between Egyptians and the Greek sanctuaries. Alternatively, it could also have been Greeks who acquired these objects themselves and offered them in a temple. Indeed, offering spoons were not entirely unknown objects to the Greeks. Some variants, such as the swimmer-shaped type, were copied in the Mediterranean region and have been found particularly at Kameiros on Rhodes (Fig. 7) and on Cyprus (Caubet and Pierrat-Bonnefois 2005, 130–1, no. 349; Bulté 2008a, 5). When offered to Aphrodite – as is the case at Naukratis as well as on Cyprus, offering spoons represent an interesting choice of votive, since they seem a highly appropriate gift to a goddess associated with love and linked with deities such as Hathor. The assimilation between Aphrodite, Hathor and the Great Goddess locally revered in Cyprus was strong particularly during the 6th to 5th centuries BC.1 What would have formed a perfect offering to Hathor could have been recognized as a fitting gift to Aphrodite.

Figure 7 Glazed composition offering spoon in the shape of a female naked swimmer from Kameiros in Rhodes, c. 7th century BC. British Museum, 1860,0404.76

1 Several sanctuaries in Cyprus were dedicated to Aphrodite assimilated to Hathor and the more local Great Goddess (Carbillet 2011a). Images of Hathor – represented on Hathoric capitals, faience amulets, terracotta figurines etc. – were particularly popular during the 6th to 5th centuries BC in Cyprus (Carbillet 2011b).