Naukratis: Greeks in Egypt

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New Year’s flasks

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1. Description

New Year’s flasks are small containers in faience (or more precisely in glazed composition), usually bearing inscriptions and iconography related to the New Year’s festival (on the meaning and function of the vessel, see below). The remains of eleven so-called New Year’s flasks are known from Naukratis, today preserved in a number of different museums. Most were made in a hard and fine sandy fabric, light yellow or slightly greenish in colour (Fig. 1). The surface is generally very worn and soapy to the touch where preserved. Only scarce traces of the apple-green glaze characteristic of 26th dynasty faience are preserved (Kaczmarczyk and Hedges 1983, 266). The flasks are often in a very fragmentary state. The relatively well preserved specimen Boston, Museum of Fine Arts Eg.Inv.3626, fashioned in a dense and fine white fabric, does not pertain to the same series (Fig. 2).

From the various elements it is possible to reconstruct the general appearance of these mould-made flasks. They correspond to the usual typology of the New Year’s flask with a lenticular body and a short neck. Such a shape is also used for pilgrim flasks, but the decoration described below is specific to the New Year’s flasks. The mouth is in the shape of a
papyrus umbel (Blanquet 1992). The upper part of the mouth is convex and smooth with a central opening running vertically through it. Bundles of lotus flowers, more or less elaborately incised or modelled in low relief, are visible below the papyriform spout (Fig. 3).

The upper part of the body is decorated on both sides with a broad, elaborate Usekh collar consisting of several concentric registers with various incised geometric designs (rectangles, triangles, circles, tear drops). In one case (Oxford, Ashmolean Museum AN1896-1908-E.3411 A), there is a vertical register of hieroglyphs in between two bands incised with a scale pattern below the Usekh collar (Fig. 4). The edge band of the flask is either left plain, decorated with a chevron pattern or bears a hieroglyphic inscription with rosettes and cross-hatching decoration beneath the inscription. A pair of zoomorphic lug handles flanks the base of the neck: on the flask in Cambridge they have the usual shape of a crouching ape covering its mouth with its hands (Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum GR.76.1887) (Fig. 1), while the neck of another flask (Fig. 2) has addorsed ibex (different from floral lug handles on a New Year’s flask found in Memphis: Nenna 2013, 240, F-20).

2. Production at Naukratis

Petrie mentioned the discovery at Naukratis of ‘necks of pilgrim-bottles of fine yellow paste’, without publishing any examples; he suggested that they were produced at Naukratis, like the scarabs and scaraboids made of a similar material (Petrie 1886, 37). A few of these necks of New Year’s flasks discovered by Petrie could be identified (British Museum 1885,1101.29, 1886,0401.1589-1590; Boston, Museum of Fine Arts RES.86.317). Hogarth’s excavations in 1903 produced a number of further
examples. A handwritten list of Hogarth’s finds from Naukratis dated 1903 includes a ‘pilgrim bottle neck’ amongst the objects discovered at the site.

This is further confirmed by the 1903 season report, in which C.C. Edgar notes ‘numerous fragments’ of ‘New Year bottles with necks in the form of lotus and papyrus’ (Edgar 1905, 134). He, too, suggests that these finds could be associated with the ‘Scarab Factory’. Two of the preserved New Year’s flasks, each one bearing a hieroglyphic inscription, could be recognized as coming from Hogarth’s 1903 excavations (Oxford, Ashmolean Museum AN1896-1908-E.3411 A and E.3411 B).

Three specimens of pilgrim flasks were analyzed by Proton Induced X-ray Emission spectrometry (PIXE) for characterization of the elemental chemical composition in March 2014 by the Centre de Recherche et de Restauration des Musées de France (C2RMF) (British Museum 1885,1101.29, 1886,0401.1589-1590). According to preliminary observations, the paste used for British Museum 1886,0401.1589 and 1886,0401.1590 contains a rather high proportion of lead antimonate as do the yellow glazed scarabs produced at the Scarab Factory. A thorough study of these PIXE analyses will provide more information on the various faience products from this workshop.¹

Although it is well known that Naukratite scarabs and scaraboids were widely distributed in the Mediterranean area (Gorton 1996, 91–131), a Naukratite origin of pilgrim flasks found in similar Mediterranean contexts is less convincing. Many examples of New Year’s flasks were discovered outside Egypt, not only in East Greece – especially in Rhodes where such flasks were probably also produced (Webb 1978, C 19, 148, fig. 30, pl. 8; Hölbl 2005, 116–17, fig. 16; Webb forthcoming a for references) – but also in Cyprus (Clerc et al. 1976, 242–3), in the Western Mediterranean area, in Italy, Spain and Carthage (Hölbl 1979, 34–41; Hölbl 2005, 126, fig. 26; Caubet and Pierrat-Bonnefois 2005, 151; for examples exclusively from funerary contexts see Stampolidis 2003, 493, nos 917 and 919; Bubenheimer-Erhart 2012, 144–7, pls 35–7).

A possible Naukratite origin has been suggested for a pilgrim flask found in Carthage (Stampolidis 2003, 493). However, no exact parallel has so far been found for this among the fragments in fine yellow paste discovered at Naukratis itself. The production of New Year’s flasks at Naukratis was perhaps intended for a more local or regional market. Indeed, New Year’s flasks discovered in Egypt form closer parallels for the Naukratis finds than those found outside Egypt: the upper part of two complete flasks (one from Thebes Fig. 5; the other kept in Eton College, ECM.1704-2010, see Schneider 1999, 72) and two necks (both in the Petrie Museum, UC45472 and UC8872) are similar to a Naukratis specimen (Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum GR.76.1887) (Fig. 1). They all have however a pale turquoise glaze, not an apple-green one.

¹ The scientific investigation of faience from Naukratis is led by A. Meek, in association with A. Masson, A. Villing and V. Webb (British Museum). The PIXE analyses were conducted by A. Bouquillon and other scientists at the C2RMF, in association with G. Pierrat-Bonnefois (Louvre).
3. Dating

New Year’s flasks tend to be perceived as purely Saite products (664–525 BC). When cartouches are incised on the body of the New Year’s flasks, they refer to Apries and Amasis, the two last important pharaohs of the 26th dynasty (Blanquet 1992, 52), or to the Divine Votaress Ankhnesneferibre (God’s wife of Amun from around 586 to 525 BC) (Caubet and Pierrat-Bonnefois 2005, 148–51, no. 398). Furthermore, specimens discovered outside of Egypt originate from 7th to 6th century BC contexts (Caubet and Pierrat-Bonnefois 2005, 151). However, recent excavations within Egypt have provided a few examples from later contexts. Flasks are attested in a late 26th to early 27th dynasty context (Masson 2007, 614, pl. XXVII) and in Persian contexts at ‘Ayn Manawir in the Oasis of Dakhla (Wuttmann et al. 1996, 429–30). Contexts dated to the end of the Late to early Ptolemaic Period in the Priests’ Quarter of Karnak
have also yielded some fragments, although they are probably residual (Masson forthcoming d).

For the Naukratis flasks a 6th-century BC date would be most likely. The bodies of 7th-century flasks are often characterized by a representation of Hathor in the shape of a cow and related marsh scenes, well attested on various East Greek sites (Hölbl 2005, 116, fig. 16; Webb forthcoming a), but not observed on the Naukratis flasks (Fig. 6). The production of the Naukratis flasks would therefore correspond to the main period of activity at the Scarab Factory, which Andrée Gorton (1996, 178) and Virginia Webb (forthcoming a) place in the first third of the 6th century BC. Still, a date in the period of the reign of Amasis, or even slightly later, should perhaps not be completely excluded either.

Figure 6 New Year’s flask of the late 7th century BC, from Egypt. British Museum, 1893,0514,32

4. Propitiatory inscriptions

New Year’s flasks often bear an inscription, arranged in a vertical band in the centre of the body or on the edge band, wishing the owner of the flask an excellent year (Blanquet 1992, 52; Caubet and Pierrat-Bonnefois 2005,
147). The standard formula (\textit{wp rnp t nfr n nb.s} ‘inaugurate(s) a perfect year for its lord’, with ‘lord’ referring to the owner) is preceded by the name of one or several deities. The deities invoked most often are ones linked with the Theban and Memphite triad, foremost Ptah, Sekhmet and Amun. As demonstrated by von Bissing, gods locally revered are favoured (see for example specimens from Sais and San el-Hagar: von Bissing 1902, nos 3741–3). However, this is not always the case. In the Theban region, for example, one New Year’s flask mentions the Theban triad, Amun, Mut and Khonsu as well as the local god ‘Montu Lord of Thebes’ (Masson 2007, 614, pl. XXVII); another invokes Ptah and Neith, deities mostly revered in the Delta, particularly at Memphis and Sais (Fig. 5).

At Naukratis, the usual good wishes for the New Year are inscribed on two fragmentary specimens (Oxford, Ashmolean Museum AN1896-1908-E.3411 A and E.3411 B) originating from Hogarth’s excavations in 1903. One mentions Amun-Ra (Oxford, Ashmolean Museum AN1896-1908-E.3411 A) (Fig. 4) and the other Bastet (Oxford, Ashmolean Museum, AN1896-1908-E.3411 B). Amun-Ra was the main Egyptian god revered at Naukratis since the 26th dynasty (Guermeur 2005, 126–38) and the cult of Bastet was a particularly important in the Delta.

5. Function and contents

As implied by the propitiatory formula, these flasks were offered as a gift for the New Year’s festival, which took place around the 19th July – during the month of Thot – at the beginning of the flood season (Blanquet 1992, 52; Friedman \textit{et al}. 1998, 229; Caubet and Pierrat-Bonnefois 2005, 148). The iconography displayed on the flasks can be related to this festival. The baboon, so often present on pilgrim flasks, including on Naukratite examples, is a form of the god Thoth. Thoth, ‘the Living Baboon’, is associated with the calculation of time (Keimer 1947, 8–9) and particularly with the renewal of royal power during the New Year’s festival (on this association and the New Year festival in general, see Goyon 1986; Goyon 2013).

The contents of the flasks are still a matter of debate. It has been suggested that they contained ‘elixirs or other cosmetic liquids’ (Stampolidis 2003, 493), especially in the case of flasks discovered in funerary contexts outside of Egypt. This hypothesis seems supported by the existence of a specific unguent for the New Year’s festival (Chassinat 1930, 120). However, considering the beliefs and various rituals linked with the New Year, it is quite likely that the flasks could also have been filled with the regenerating and purifying ‘fresh water of the flood’, known as \textit{mw rnp} (Goyon 1972, n. 72), a view held by several specialists (for example Schneider 1999, 72). This symbolic (and magical?) content would have been associated with ideas of renewal and rebirth. Finally, the chemical analysis of the contents of one flask identified traces of honey, thus possibly indicating the reuse of the flask (Caubet and Pierrat-Bonnefois 2005, 151).