MB II Flat-Bottomed Handmade Cooking Pots from Wadi Tumilat: A Useful Chronological Marker or an Indicator of Technical Style?

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Flat-bottomed handmade cooking pots are a signature vessel of the Middle Bronze Age II in the Southern Levant. However, these cooking pots are not just a Levantine phenomenon as they appear further south, beyond the North Sinai, into the Eastern Egyptian Delta, first appearing in this region in the Middle Bronze IIA\(^1\) period. Numerous discussions concerning this vessel type have focused on whether its various morphological attributes are chronological markers during the MB II period, however, there is little consensus among scholars. The handmade cooking pots found in the Delta region are usually deemed ‘Asiatic’ in style with some considered imports from the north (Aston 2002: 46), indicators of a Syro-Palestine pastoral community in the Delta region marking the pre-Hyksos period (Redmount 1995a; 1995b). Unfortunately, these vessels, so common in the early phases of the MBII at so many sites, are seldom discussed in detail.

These vessels are found at a number of sites located in the Egyptian Delta, primarily to the east of the Pelusiac branch of the Nile, and they have been suggested to be typologically analogous to those that occur to the north. Aston (2002: 45f), for example, lists numerous sites in the Southern Levant where similar vessels occur to those found at Tell el-Dab‘a. However, on closer examination, similarities are less obvious than expected. The handmade cooking pots in the Eastern Delta are different stylistically, and generalizations of morphological parallels should not be used.

Redmount (1989: 251; 1995a: 187) rightly distinguishes differences in the forms excavated at Tell el-Maskhuta from those identified at other Southern

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\* This paper is dedicated to John S. (Jack) Holladay Jr., who I am proud to consider my teacher, mentor, colleague, and friend. His approach to archaeology goes beyond just putting a trowel in the ground as he has always insisted on utilizing a multi-disciplinary approach incorporating anthropology, ethnography and the sciences, to name a few.

\(^1\) MB IIA hereafter. It is well beyond the scope of this paper to delve into the ongoing chronological debate of the Middle Bronze Age in North Egypt and Syro-Palestine (see Bietak 2013; 1997: 125f; Dever 1997; 1991; 1985; Marcus 2013; and Szafranski (2002)).
Levantine sites, suggesting the forms found in the Delta are unique to the region. Although a connection to a Syro-Palestinian heritage occurs at Tell el-Maskhuta, the flat-bottomed cooking pots “exhibit subtle yet distinctive differences in shape and decoration from their Syro-Palestinian prototypes” (Redmount 1995b: 78). This is also true of those handmade cooking pots collected on a survey of sites in the Wadi Tumilat. Holladay (1997: 190) is correct in suggesting that these vessels are similar to those uncovered at Tell el-Maskhuta. However, Redmount states that flat-bottomed cooking pots with stick impressions are more numerous at surveyed sites than Tell el-Maskhuta (1989: 827, fn. 15). On re-examination, there may in fact be more differences between the sites in the region than first thought, and when compared to the handmade cooking pots discovered at sites to the north, the disparity becomes even more obvious. I will argue that key morphological features formed in the initial stage of production are clearly apparent, and that the choices utilized by the potter are technical and produced through culturally learned behavior. The MB II flat-bottomed handmade cooking pot is perhaps best described by variant ‘technical styles’, rather than by using the traditional approach of regional typologies.

Typology of Flat-bottomed Handmade Cooking Pots Southern Levantine Forms

Scholars have long argued that morphological variation in finger impressions and ‘stick holes’, and the placement of rope moulding or appliqué decoration, are indicative of chronological change through the MB IIA/B at certain sites. Others, however, refute this. An initial study by Albright (1932) from material excavated at Tel Beit Mirsim, suggests that the MB IIA variations showed a ‘steam hole’ above a rope moulding, eventually changing to a stick impression, which does not perforate the vessel wall, later in this period. These partial stick perforations continued, along with thumb impressions, during the transitional MB IIA/B. The MB IIB period saw a continuation of thumb impressions, with

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2 This is a common term used by many scholars to indicate the small circular perforations that penetrate completely or partially through the vessel wall. However, this term is misleading as there are no studies, that this author is aware of, that would suggest that a stick may have been used to create these holes. Coarse grasses, reeds or straw are equally likely to have been used as a tool.